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At the Trail's End

by

Naomi Marshall

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing

Thesis Committee:
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Portland State University
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Abstract

Oregon City lies at the base of Willamette Falls. It was one of the few known points in the Oregon Territory, as the destination for thousands coming overland to lay claim to the acres upon acres of forested land. Presently, Oregon City is known by its proximity to Portland. The two neighboring settlements were considered “long-distance,” when on a spring evening in 1889, energy generated from the falls was carried through 14 miles of recently-laid copper wire to power streetlights in downtown Portland’s Chapman Square. It was the first ever long-distance transmission of electricity. Oregon City, the oldest incorporated settlement west of the Rocky Mountains, is a town in transition, as it attempts to reinvent itself as something more than an old mill town, building on its natural beauty and historical significance.

This essay collection showcases the history and character of Oregon City, highlighting the people and places that have called it home.

Keywords: Oregon City, Oregon Trail, Pioneers, Daniel Magone, Scott Thomason

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Table of Contents

Abstract	i
Acknowledgements	ii
Legacy	1
Fiends in Human Shape	12
At the Trail's End	26
Talking with Ghosts	38
In the Stacks	50
Dime Store Desperado	64
The Greatest Auto Dealer Commercial of All Time	80
Works Cited	99

Legacy

We were hardly pioneers, my mom and I. Leaving Lewiston, Idaho, we followed the path of Lewis and Clark—along the Snake River to the Columbia. This was move number five inside of a year and a half. In keeping with the theme, we were moving because of a man, the boyfriend my mom met at her 20-year high school reunion. Class of 1975, though my mom dropped out two months before graduating. By the time of commencement, she was barely 18 and married to my dad after only two months of dating. By one measure, two months was too long a time and by another, it was enough. I hadn't thought of my mother as impulsive but the evidence was there. We had criss-crossed the country, living in disparate climates for only a few months at a time. And now we were speeding toward Oregon City, nearly four months into her long-distance relationship. We both wanted stability, something as solid and sure as the canyon walls blurring outside the window of her Acura. At 13, I had seen an equal number of states from this vantage point. Oregon was just another. It was hard to feel excited by moving, something that had become so routine. Things would settle, she told me. We would settle.

Oregon City was built on a floodplain, the narrow strip of land parallel to the Willamette River and a basalt cliffside, at the base of Willamette Falls. The horseshoe-shaped falls drew people for centuries. The many Native tribes of the Pacific Northwest traveled to the falls in the summer to fish the spawning

salmon, drawn home to die, without any hope of ascending the 1,500-foot cascades. The falls drew John McLoughlin of the Hudson's Bay Company to the site, to claim the land. The validity of this claim would remain in flux for the duration of his life. At dispute was whether McLoughlin claimed the land for his employer or for himself.

The earliest missionaries and settlers followed McLoughlin's lead. They built houses that were soon hidden in the shadows of the mills, eager to harness the energy of the falls—the second largest by volume in America, rivaled only by Niagara Falls. Willamette Falls, long dubbed the Niagara of the west, preceded its east coast cousin in one feat. Captain Paul Webb made a dangerous promise while drunk—he would jump the falls. Just days later, a crowd of thousands lined the banks and bluffs to witness firsthand this daring feat. In the days—and indeed minutes—before the event Webb was fed a steady diet of whisky to keep up his bravado. In 1895, Webb became the first man to attempt, and survive, going over Willamette Falls in a barrel, thoughtfully lined with moss and wood shavings to soften the impact of the four-story fall. Six years later, Anna Edson Taylor successfully navigated her barrel over the Niagara Falls.

The falls have proven powerful, with drownings reported as early as February, 1843, when a boat was unexpectedly pulled over the break. In heavy rains, the water swells and churns and claims everything in its path, with reports of houses swept off their foundations and over the falls, candles still aglow in the windows. During the flood of December 1861, the Oregon City flour mill and its 5,000 sacks of flour were caught in the current and it was discovered—almost

whole—just outside of Astoria, swept nearly to the mouth of the Pacific Ocean by way of the Columbia River.

In February of 1996, Willamette River once again breached its banks, overflowing into downtown Oregon City. When the heavy rains stopped, when the worst of it was over, Bill Clinton surveyed the flood damage by helicopter. My mother, step-father, and I did the same from the panoramic Oregon City Municipal Elevator. At 90 feet above downtown, billed as America's only perpendicular street, the silver, circular observation deck by the bluffs resembles a flying saucer. This attempt at modernity, envisioned in 1954, looks out of place, the center point between the decaying 19th century factories that encircle Willamette Falls and the quaint store fronts running parallel to the river on Main Street.

In the flood those streets had become rivers. A photograph of a man maneuvering Main Street in a small motorized boat made the front page of the *Anchorage Daily News*, my father had called to tell me. Now he finally knew where Oregon City was. I was seeing the city for the first time when it was submerged underwater. I didn't have a sense of the damage. I just looked down at the rush of the river, now mud brown in color, and felt frightened by its power. I would spend the next several years in state of constant discovery of all that stood once the flood waters receded.

* * *

With the unpredictability of the water and an ever-growing population as midwesterners followed the deep wagon ruts along the Oregon Trail, Oregon City grew first upward, then outward. As early as the 1850s, houses were being erected on the flat shelf of the bluff. Today, this area is known as the McLoughlin District, so named after McLoughlin's house, already one of the oldest in Oregon City in 1909, was pulled up Singer Hill by mule, where it was set upon a new foundation.

In the decades since McLoughlin died, the house fell into disrepair. It had been a brothel known as The Phoenix Hotel. The damage to the stately white house—its integrity and its reputation—was so severe that the city planned to demolish it. Local writer Eva Emery Dye was so horrified at the notion of tearing down such a house that she spearheaded the campaign to save it, envisioning the renovated house as a museum dedicated to McLoughlin.

Dye and her husband, Charles, had arrived in 1891. They built a home on the bluff in 1893, just blocks from the now fully restored McLoughlin home. Theirs is just one of over 300 historically significant homes, leading to the neighborhood's designation as a historic conservation district. Dye, an occasional poet under the alias Jennie Juniper, found a fertile riverbed in the Willamette: "I began writing as soon as I reached this old and romantic historical city. I saw beautiful historical material lying around like nuggets." Dye's portrait of McLoughlin was reflective of the unrelenting pioneer spirit, the rugged possibility of the west that so captivated her.

* * *

I don't know what pulled me back to Oregon City on a recent spring day. I felt lured by something more seductive than curiosity, as I found myself halfway there before I'd given any thought as to where I was driving. I doubt I'd even thought of Oregon City once in the five years since my mother was pulled to Lewiston like a homing pigeon. With the U-Haul packed, I asked her if she was ready to go, ready for the drive ahead of her. In spite of the three separate times we had moved from Lewiston, she tells me she was never ready to leave. My mom says she has no sense of direction. She jokes she could turn a corner and become lost. In truth, she has a sense of only one direction—*back*.

I don't know what I expected to find, standing on the opposite side of a gate, at the foot of the gravel driveway that wound its way through the squat little noble firs. I studied the horizon, searching out the small white house that I hated for being so far from everything, that so often felt to me like a prison, a remote island. In a sense, it was—the lone Oregon City address surrounded by residents of Beavercreek. With the property line of the 44-acre Christmas tree farm crossing the division, we belonged to Oregon City on a technicality.

Through the trees I caught sight of the 1910 farmhouse, half-hidden by overgrown Rhododendron bushes. My mind flashed to a day in early spring, coming home from visiting my dad in Alaska. We drove up to the house, encased with bushes bursting with fat magenta blooms, looking even brighter after months of snow and darkness. I felt such relief to be coming home, even as my mother cursed the walls stained grey from the ancient furnace that belched greasy, black smoke, and my step-father drilled sheets of wood at 3am when

sloping, sagging floors gave way. We settled, and the house settled around us. I watched the silhouette fading with the dusk. I was surprised by how sorry I would be when the house fell out of view. I looked at that little decaying house and I saw the most stable home I ever had.

Dye came to admire McLoughlin greatly, as she interviewed the older pioneers who had known the doctor personally as research for her first book, 1900's *McLoughlin and Old Oregon: A Chronicle*. It was written in a style all her own, described by biographer Sheri Bartlett Browne as “a curious blend of fact, fiction, biography, and romance.” Dye’s portrait of McLoughlin was a generous one, painting him as a martyr who sacrificed his livelihood for peace, and prosperity among the pioneers.

McLoughlin had been building upon the land at the falls since the 1830s; his mill lost to fire. When the Methodist missionaries arrived, they, too, wanted this handsomely situated plot of land. As more people flocked to the falls, disputes over the land grew more contentious. There were organized efforts to block McLoughlin’s claim in Congress, questioning first his legal right to claim land as a Canadian and later, the validity of his oath to obtain American citizenship. Dye’s McLoughlin doesn’t respond with lengthy, fiery letters, accusing those who so readily accepted his assistance of stealing land from an old man. Instead, in her narrative, he is composed, dignified, seeming unaffected until, in a momentary loss of self-control, he exclaims: “In my old age I find myself a man without a country.” He died belonging to no land, no country. In

the final act of staking his claim, he was buried next to his house at the falls. The land didn't belong to him so much as he belonged to the land.

My father never gets lost. It's as if he has a map where his veins should be. The protruding arteries, the spiderweb of vessels, are a tangle of highways and gravel roads. He left his hometown 30 years ago, but he could find his way like he never left. He could trace his finger down the faint blue line of road and across the river that divides the valley—represented by the scar running the length of his forearm, the result of an accident at the mill. This marked the moment when he knew we had to leave that place. He drove the 3,000 miles from Lewiston, Idaho to Alaska with the metal plate taken from his arm jingling on his keychain. He seems unsentimental about leaving. Places stay with him, an internal knowledge of geography and landscape and routes that runs deeper than memory. When my father first came to visit me in Oregon City, he called for directions to the farmhouse. I had been living there for two years and I didn't know a single street name. He described where he was, having driven through a tunnel, he told me, and then pulled to the side of the road overlooking a huge waterfall.

“What waterfall?” I wondered.

“Are you joking?” he asked. “I don't know how you could miss it.”

The falls had been kept secret by the flood waters. When I looked out over the town on a grey February morning, the water level had risen so high that it obscured everything—including the falls. That great cascade of water looked only like an eddy swirling in the center of the Willamette. The falls are all but hidden

behind the paper mill, sat at the end of Main Street, eclipsing the river. With only rare glimpses, seen from a few spots high in the bluffs, it's remarkably easy to forget that Willamette Falls exists.

I don't share my father's knack for geography, his deep-rooted sense of place. I am the exact opposite—so deeply and irrevocably sentimental about the places I have lived with only memories to cling to, with little in the way of knowledge. I rely on him for this. “What was that place...?” or “Where were we when...?” He always remembers, describing the route we'd taken, the places we had seen along the way that I had forgotten about.

There is so much of Oregon City I had forgotten about, or just never knew. I was a tourist still, 20 years after moving to the state. I circled historic houses on streets I'd never walked, let alone seen. I visited landmarks advertised in glossy brochures—the McLoughlin House, the End of the Oregon Trail. I took the elevator for the first time and stood at the helm of that flying saucer. I looked out, surveying the city—not gawking at damage but taking in decades of gradual change. The elevator doors opened and deposited proper tourists onto the observation deck. They balked, one saying disappointedly of the view, “It's just roofs.” He glanced out of the window for the briefest moment and walked away, his party trailing behind him. He doesn't know what he's looking at, I thought. You have to know the city to appreciate it.

* * *

The most recently developed, level of Oregon City is referred to colloquially as “the top of the hill.” Only a few miles from the floodplain, and it might as well be another town entirely. It’s a far cry from the rustic 19th century brick buildings that line Main Street and colorful, picturesque Victorians of the McLoughlin District. Hilltop is a vast parking lot interrupted with strip mall shopping centers. It has the feel of Anyplace, any generic-brand suburb. At the top of the hill, historical relevance is conveyed through the Pioneer Car Wash streaked with rust and the nearby pizzeria offering the Pioneer Combo—made with Canadian bacon in a nod to McLoughlin’s heritage. This was my Oregon City.

Looking around, it’s easy to remember why I had hated it so much. It’s so encased in asphalt that I questioned if anything ever grew here, remembering I would go to the sprawling community college campus just to see trees and grass.

I walked the campus, passing by a painting I had seen countless times without paying any attention. Even with glances, as I rushed between classes, I knew it was to represent early Oregon, with the covered wagon in the background, the depictions of Native Americans dressed in tanned hides, mingling among the settlers. But there was so much I hadn’t seen. The background is comprised entirely of pastels—the cliffside growing out of pale, delicate blues and pinks and mint green with small houses outlined in misty white. Through the haze, I saw the house at a 45-degree angle and immediately recognize it as McLoughlin’s on its ascent up Singer Hill. At the fore is McLoughlin with his shock of white hair, encircled by admirers, with all eyes

directed toward him—including the eye of the viewer. In the corner of the canvas, among the white settlers, I'm surprised to see the smiling faces of a Black man and a Chinese man. Their inclusion in this idealized, harmonious scene feels out of place; their open-mouthed smiles betray the realities of exclusion laws, expulsion, and violence. The image celebrates a history we'd feel comfortable with, but it is not the history we've inherited.

It's so hard not to rhapsodize the past. It's hard not to romanticize history in a town whose very identity seems locked in the past, as the first incorporated settlement in the west—a distinction that would breed a laundry list of firsts in industry and infrastructure. The state of Oregon grew from the seeds sown in Oregon City. It's hard to imagine anything fertile here, with its 100-year-old mills, empty and rusting, a monument in memoriam to the industries that once thrived. The ruggedness of this staunchly blue-collar town was all but replaced when the last of the mills closed in 2010. Downtown is no longer blanketed with the noxious, sulphuric sweat of the paper mill. The smoky dive bars that anchored Main Street have been replaced with wine bars and Italian bistros.

Amid the change, Oregon City is now thinking about its future. It's letting go some of that history to make way for what could be, bolstering what it has, not just what it once had. Soon, they will be stripping away the withered husks of the paper mill to break ground on a new waterfront, with Willamette Falls as the crowning jewel. For the first time in 150 years, the falls will be accessible to the

public—close enough to feel the rush of cool air, to hear the roar of the water as it cascades over the falls.

Fiends in Human Shape

Meldrum Bar Park sits on the Willamette River, just south of where it meets the Clackamas River, in Gladstone, Oregon. Though only a few blocks from McLoughlin Boulevard, it feels remarkably removed from the sea of strip malls and car dealership lots. The park is encircled by bare trees, with the flat surface of the water reflecting the slate grey of the February sky. A deafening murder of crows fly overhead in a wide and fractious formation. It is the mitigated wild.

The paved parking lot edges toward the water, leaving only a small strip of shore line. Here, a dozen or so men in heavy winter coats mill about, talking in small clusters. I watch one man as he pauses intermittently to take pulls on a can of beer nearly hidden in thick fists, while he still kept a watchful eye on his fishing pole, its handle shoved into the rocky soil.

In low tide, the bar is a long, skinny spit—but as the tide rises, it is severed into twin islands. Just beyond, on the opposite shore, a sudden break in the tree line exposes the multi-level waterfront houses that serve as the backdrop to the line of men fishing on the shore. Surveying the park, I try to imagine how the land might have looked 120 years before, when the detectives stood here, somewhere in the park, and uncovered the body.

William S. Ladd arrived in Portland in April, 1851, months after the city was incorporated. He started as a merchant, selling dry goods in a store along the waterfront. From there, he founded the Ladd and Tilton Bank in 1859, the first in

the newly formed state of Oregon. Ladd had a hand in everything: politics, farming, transportation, infrastructure, and urban planning. Such investments paid off for Ladd; at the time of his death in 1893, his fortune was conservatively estimated at \$20,000,000.

Of all that he built, he considered River View Cemetery his proudest achievement. He founded it along with Henry Corbett and Henry Failing in 1879, so that “Portland might have a proper field of rest for her dead.” Ladd himself was buried here in the first days of January, 1893. When the “proper field” had been established in the west hills, many among Portland society were exhumed from Lone Fir cemetery and reinterred here. The gravestones read like a city map: Burnside. Flanders. Northrup. Hoyt.

It is quiet save for the sound of birdsong and the steady, dull of traffic on Highway 43. The panoramic views once offered have been eclipsed by towering Douglas firs. Sun dapples onto the ledger marker—the flat slab of dull red granite—bearing the name William S. Ladd. It is one of the plainest among the ornate marble spires and statues. It had been plainer still on Monday morning, May 17th, 1897, when thieves made off with the wooden marker with the initials W.S.L. carved into it, leaving nothing but dirt strewn everywhere, trampled underbrush and broken tree limbs, marking the trail forged to the river, and a scattering of clues: one shovel, one broken carpenter’s knife, one dress shoe, confirmed to be that of the victim’s, and one wood-and-glass coffin, smashed open and empty.

* * *

They were halfway across the Madison Bridge when Daniel Magone, age 45, paused to look out across the Willamette. “These are desperate times, Charlie,” he said to his companion, 23-year-old Charles Montgomery. The two men shared a few beers and a hearty meal that February evening in a hotel tavern on Portland’s waterfront, before setting out for a stroll. Taking Montgomery by the lapels of his winter coat, Magone said: “I don’t know how we are going to get along, getting poorer all the time. I think if I can’t get ahead some other way pretty soon, I’ll go out to the cemetery and dig up Ladd’s bones.”

Magone was the son of a pioneer and decorated Major, and brother to a state representative. He and his wife, Henrietta, operated a park on the Willamette, having built up their river-side property with a bathing pool, 20 seaside cabins, and concessions. This was the place to wile away hot summer days. Evenings were spent dancing to a live band on the Blue Bird dance barge. But with the Panic of 1893, when the railroad bubble burst and the banks failed, Magone was forced to sell parcels of the land. What he didn’t sell, he lost to foreclosure. He owed Clackamas County hundreds in taxes. Where Magone had been considered well-off before the Panic of 1893, by 1897, he was without land, “reduced to absolute beggary.” With this change in status, Magone “cherished a grievance against certain men of wealth,” and had been especially vocal about his dislike of bankers—bankers like Ladd.

Montgomery had heard Magone’s scheme before, he later told authorities. He and others had heard Magone lay out this plan several times, laughing it off as bravado after one too many beers. But there, alone on the bridge, Montgomery

sobered to the seriousness of Magone's plotting. He wanted nothing to do with it, he said. But months later, Montgomery had a change of heart. Desperate and broke, he was swayed by Magone's promise of a \$50,000 payoff from the family in exchange for Ladd's remains: "I guess they'd give me something handsome to get them back."

On Sunday night, Magone and his team, which now included Ed Hall and William Rector, assembled at a tavern in Portland. They went over the plan one last time. Magone was well-prepared, having been planning for this day for the better part of two months. Hall, the newest recruit, was tasked with monitoring the telephone line of Ladd's second son, who lived a half-mile from the cemetery. Magone had already spliced a stolen telephone into the phone line at the Ladd home. If any alert was given to Ladd's son, Hall could signal to the men on the hill. Hall was unqualified for the job; he would later reveal he had never used a telephone before and didn't quite understand Magone's instruction. Rector, an out-of-work wood hauler, had a more straightforward task. He was hired muscle, promised \$50 to carry Ladd's casket to a boat moored out of sight, in a small creek near the cemetery.

With the plan firmly in place, the men split up, traveling to the cemetery separately. Rector caught the streetcar, with Magone trailing on the next one. Hall and Montgomery walked, taking differing routes. It was just after midnight when they reassembled over Ladd's grave.

* * *

America's most notorious grave-robbing—and perhaps Magone's inspiration—had been in 1878, when the remains of New York multimillionaire A.T. Stewart were stolen. What followed was a lengthy and well-publicized negotiation that occurred through cryptic messages exchanged in the personals of the *New York Herald*.

Two years later, Stewart's widow paid \$20,000 for the remains—a burlap sack of bones, which were never confirmed to have been Stewart's. The remains were placed in a vault of the Cathedral of the Incarnation in Garden City, New York. It was widely believed that the vault was wired with an alarm that would cause the cathedral bells to ring if disturbed. Bells had become common anti-theft devices, having first been used in an effort to curb accidental live burials. A less subtle alarm would have been the "Coffin Torpedo," a gun which fired heavy lead balls if the casket was opened. The patent for this device was filed just months after the Stewart grave-robbing.

Magone was thinking of similar alarms when he stood over Ladd's grave. He thrust his knife into the ground, dragging the blade around the perimeter of the burial plot, severing the anticipated, though nonexistent, alarm. He waited, and when no warning came from Hall, Magone resumed work. By Montgomery's account, he and Magone traded digging duties, while Rector mostly looked on. Perhaps it was a good thing Rector had reserved his strength. Magone had plotted to steal Ladd's bones, believing "his body must be nearly resolved to dust," in the four and a half years since his burial. However, upon breaking open

the coffin, he was surprised to find Ladd's corpse was a well-preserved 300 pounds. They would have to leave the casket; it was dead weight.

In Rector's version of events he had no idea of the identity of the corpse. To his knowledge it was a pauper's grave and the body was bound for the laboratory. Stealing a body for medical experimentation was still illegal, though less sinister than stealing for ransom. When Rector learned of this plot, he claimed he tried to leave. Montgomery forced him to stay, he said, by holding a pistol on him and demanding Rector to continue to work, so work he did.

Rector wrestled the body from the coffin and wrapped it in an oilcloth with relative ease. It took the effort of all three men to strap it to a plank and hoist to the surface. Marching the body down the steep, forested hillside was slow-going, and by the time Ladd's corpse had been loaded into the boat, dawn was coming on fast. Ladd was only part of the plan. Hedging their bets, the men also planned to steal the body of businessman C.H. Lewis, just five months dead. But now there was no time for the men to work; they settled on Ladd alone and fled. Rector and Long went by road, while Magone and Montgomery rowed the body south, fighting against the river's current.

The men had been in such a hurry to flee the cemetery that they left behind their tools, including what the police called their "initial clew"—the broken knife. Detectives paraded the pieces from one blacksmith to another, hoping someone would recognize it. One maker claimed credit for it, reporting to have made it for Magone. Learning of Magone's regular haunts, the police set out

for Oregon City. In bar after bar, they were met with similar portraits: he was peculiar, lazy, and quite talkative. Magone invited dozens to partake in the crime, including one man just days before the grave-robbing. At trial, as evidence of his mental instability, the defense would claim they could produce 100 witnesses who had heard Magone declare his designs on Ladd's bones.

After arresting Magone at his home on Friday, May 21st, the police went in search of Montgomery. They had connected him to Magone after a witness put the two together the night before Ladd's body was discovered missing. Oregon City police were acquainted with Montgomery. Not six months before, he had burst into the Sheriff's office, demanding to be locked up. He confessed to having killed his friend and would-be business partner with a shotgun blast to the back. The defense claimed Montgomery shot in self-defense after a failed robbery attempt. Swayed by his youthful good looks, the jury acquitted him on all charges in January, just before he met Magone. In the weeks following his trial, Montgomery developed—and some say, perpetuated—a reputation as a hardened killer. This was a far cry from his neighbor's description of a nice, quiet boy, who could be “led into misdoings, but not inclined to originate schemes” himself.

When detectives caught up with Montgomery, he was “very pale and clearly panic-stricken.” He tried to keep calm, quiet, but that didn't last long. He confessed the whole plan or, at least, as much as he knew. Montgomery led the police chief and two detectives to the park in Oregon City. He gestured around, asking, “Can you pick it out?” When no one spoke, he kicked the soil at their feet and in no time at all, the body was exposed. The only part of the plan

Montgomery couldn't illuminate was how they would make money from Ladd's corpse—ransom or reward?

Neither would have worked. On the advice of detectives, the Ladd family had not offered a reward, and they were discouraged from every corner to pay ransom. This, from the *Dalles Chronicle*, captures public sentiment: "It's hoped that they will neither offer nor give out one cent... The paying of blackmail to these wretches would soon give an impetus to the grave-robbing industry and no corpse would be safe."

Five days after the crime, Ladd's corpse was recovered free of charge. It was fitted into a new casket and reinterred in his burial plot, in the Founders Garden at River View Cemetery. This time he was laid in a "bed of concrete," with an armed guard to stand watch while it hardened, leaving "no fear that it would be disturbed by ghouls in the future." One month later, the trial began for the four men described by the *Oregon City Enterprise* as "fiends in human shape."

While the crime was solved in only a few days, it would take over a year for the cases to make their way through the courts. Magone was represented by Julius Caesar Moreland. Active in both politics and fraternal organizations, Moreland was personable and well-liked. He was also one of the most prominent local attorneys, after serving as Portland City Lawyer and Multnomah County Judge. Magone's trial would be one of Moreland's last before returning to the Judge's bench, and then to Salem to serve as a clerk for the state Supreme Court. A long-time resident of the eastside, Moreland's name was given the West- and

Eastmoreland neighborhoods that he helped develop on land that had been owned by Ladd.

When the four defendants were led into the courtroom in late June, they were standing trial together. Montgomery was the only one to plead guilty. Hall and Rector pled not guilty, while Magone pled not guilty by reason of insanity. At trial, Magone's brother, Congressman M.A. Magone, testified that he'd never recovered from the death of his daughter in 1893. This loss spurred emotional insanity, as four medical doctors testified for the defense. Witnesses reported that Magone had started sleeping in horse stables and wandering the bank of the river in the middle of the night shortly after his daughter's drowning. An Oregon City druggist was called to the stand to recount an interaction with Magone just weeks before, when Magone, unable to afford a prescription, began weeping uncontrollably and begging for ten dollars.

State psychologist Dr. Joseph evaluated Magone in jail, where the defendant claimed he was in a dissociative state broken only by the shock of his arrest and the sound of the cell door clanging shut behind him. He had no memory of the physically strenuous activity of grave-robbing, he said. After their meeting, Dr. Joseph testified for the state that his insanity was faked, adding that Magone "overdid it." Magone was found guilty on June 23rd, 1897.

A few months after the guilty verdict, Moreland filed an appeal, allowing Magone to be retried separately from the other ghouls. This trial for illegal disinterment began in the fall of 1897, and coincided with a separate trial for the charge of malicious destruction of private property—Ladd's broken casket. This,

Moreland argued, was double-jeopardy, as Magone could not be found guilty of damaging the casket without being guilty of the grave-robbing, which a jury was still deliberating. Eventually the charge was dismissed in favor of the graver charge of disinterment.

Magone was once again found guilty, and once again, Moreland appealed the decision. He argued that statements made to the police by his co-conspirators should not have been allowed as evidence in Magone's case. This was especially true for Montgomery, he argued, after he revealed his testimony at Magone's trial was given with the understanding that he would be pardoned. From the stand, Montgomery recounted his exchange with the police: "They said I would be out before very long... That is the reason I am saying what I do now... Otherwise I would not say it." But Montgomery, it turned out, was not promised leniency.

The Oregon Supreme Court granted Magone a new—and third—trial. Moreland unsuccessfully requested a change of venue from Multnomah to Clackamas County, believing it impossible to assemble a jury that wouldn't be biased toward his client. The judge refused the request with the remark that the citizens of Clackamas County read the newspapers, too, and certainly knew of Magone's alleged crimes.

The final trial went rather quickly. The same parade of doctors offered their testimony for defense yet again. However, one witness was noticeably absent. This time around Montgomery refused to testify. He had no incentive. Magone's trial dragged on for 16 months and all the while, Montgomery was housed in the jail, serving over half of the sentence for grave-robbing. When

Magone was again found guilty, they were both given a two-year sentence. The judge did not give either credit for time-served, bringing Montgomery's total incarceration closer to two and a half years. Between jail and state prison, Magone served over three years—more than the maximum sentence allowed.

Magone was released from the state penitentiary in the summer of 1900. For reasons that are not clear, he left his wife and children and moved to Montana. He and Henrietta never divorced, but it's unknown if they ever saw one another again. There is no record of him from July 1900, until January 1914, when the coroner was summoned to Thompson Falls, Montana. Magone was discovered dead in the home of a friend, where he was presumed to have lived. His body, the death notice said, would be shipped home and interred in the family burial plot.

Greenwood Hills is encircled by squat, one-story houses, largely obscuring it from the road. I had driven in circles several times before I saw the small sign marking the sharp right turn that serves as the entrance and exit. There is no designated parking but I pull off near a picnic table warped from years of rain. I begin my search, following the single dirt road that loops through the cemetery, created by decades of tire marks. I am struck by the quiet. It isn't the same quiet so often encountered in a cemetery. It is still—lifeless and forgotten.

Just steps into the cemetery, I count three headstones broken, with the pieces artfully stacked, the names worn smooth. The grass is patchy and dead. There is not a single flower, no evidence of a recent visitor. The lush green slopes

of neighboring River View Cemetery are visible. From grave to grave, there is barely a half-mile separating Ladd from Magone, yet the distance feels much greater.

In a patch of dirt and dry, yellow grass, I find it. I stand over Magone's grave, a simple red granite grave marker—a fraction the size of Ladd's—bearing the word "Father." Next to him is Henrietta, as "Mother." I follow the genealogical line of headstones to two of his sons—twins, Max and Rex, born in 1894. Neither boy lived past age four, with Max dying in 1898 while Magone was incarcerated.

Son Roscoe worked in a factory producing plywood to help support the family. When an accident severed his arm at the age of 16, he successfully sued his employer for not mitigating the risk of injury to a minor. Henrietta went from homemaker to housekeeper. The contents of the home she shared with Magone was auctioned off by the sheriff for payment of back taxes. The family moved to St. John's where Magone's younger sons, Cecil and Cyril—also twins—both became high school track and field stars, with the local papers reporting their many victories. I begin to wonder about Magone's daughters, Lulu and Marion, buried elsewhere with their husbands. This family feels familiar to me, after reading so much of their difficulties, all that they had and then lost.

As I walk the line of grave markers, I see something rust-colored under a mound of dry dirt and, without thinking, I begin to dig, the dust caking my hands. The headstone emerges, looking as though it has been swallowed by the earth, with the dirt that has settled into the engraving: Francette Magone, the

daughter whose death had so affected Magone. At the time of the trial a rumor circulated that the young girl had drowned on property owned by Ladd, with the grave-robbing a strange act of revenge. This wasn't true, of course. She died at Magone's Park, where Magone had been watching her from the shore. When she slipped beneath the surface of the water, he charged into the river but couldn't reach her time. But I wonder if this is where it all began, with the purchase of the family burial plot. Did he look up from her grave, out across the field to the hills of River View, and wish he had Ladd's money so that he could afford a monument befitting his grief?

Magone seemed to vanish from his family history. It isn't known if he remained connected with his family—but, in death, they were disconnected from him. He wasn't identified by name in Major Magone's 1902 obituary; he was described only as a surviving son residing in Montana. Following the death of Magone's brother Edward in 1922, suffering a heart attack in the middle of the night, several newspapers noted the similarity between Edward's death and Magone's, misidentifying him as "James."

When *The Oregonian* reprinted the story of the Ladd grave-robbing in 1935, Magone wasn't just omitted; this time he became someone new. Published as part of a series on police investigations, the story compiled all that had run in the paper during the week that Ladd's body was missing. Accompanying the story were photographs of the four men taken upon their arrival at the state prison—an archival request by *The Oregonian's* reporter in a letter to the warden. The

photos are captioned by their names: Rector, Long, Montgomery, and their ringleader... “Don Morrow.” The close-up image shows his bushy eyebrows, even more pronounced with his head cleanly shaven and his face stripped of the thick mustache he wore at trial. What isn’t shown in the re-printed photo is the patch sewn onto his prison-issued wool blazer, showing the name and prisoner number of Daniel Magone.

At the Trail's End

Standing next to a sign welcoming me to the Historic End of the Oregon Trail, I look up at the three comically oversized wagons which house the End of the Trail Interpretive Center. They feature paneling in a reddish shade of brown edged with raised molding to emulate slats of wood. In the winter, the canvas is removed to prevent damage from wind and rain, so that the sturdy white frame encases the buildings like a ribcage. This modest museum, devoted to pioneer life and old Oregon, is one of many that dot the Oregon Trail, but it's the only one modeled after its prevailing symbol. The guides dress in modest white shirts and long, cotton dresses in approximate period style. In summer they give tours of the grounds when the neat rows of the garden are bursting with produce, noting the potato as a dietary staple, the high cost of onions at 50 cents each, and Henderson Luelling—the man who traveled the Trail with his trees to start Oregon's first apple orchard.

Barely inside, I'm greeted enthusiastically by a docent with shaggy brown hair and suspenders, squinting into the afternoon sun streaming through the door behind me. He efficiently offers the history of the site in a few sparse, swift sentences. "The land is called the Abernethy Green. It belonged to [former governor] George Abernethy. People used to camp here for the winter when they first arrived. It's the official End of the Oregon Trail." With that bit of business out of the way, he's eager to learn where I'm visiting from. I shrug and say, "Here." He looks disappointed. This is my first time visiting the museum, in spite of 20 years in Oregon—ten of which were passed in Oregon City. With wagon

motifs throughout the town and the remarkable number of local businesses taking the name Trail's End—a coffeeshop, a saloon, dental office, golf course—the history fades into the background while the kitsch of the museum stands front and center. I think of the wagons as the archipelago they formed when the Willamette River breached its banks in the 1996 flood, leaving all of downtown Oregon City underwater, or the feeling of seeing them come into view after long car trips. Speeding down nearby I-205, the 50-foot wagons on the horizon were a beacon guiding me home.

The wagons became a part of the landscape in 1993, beginning initially as an outdoor exhibit for the anniversary of the Great Migration of 1843, commemorating the wagon train of 800 people led, in part, by missionary Marcus Whitman. The wagons were a hit, and city officials immediately started discussing a permanent museum to attract pioneer tourism. The End of the Trail Interpretive Center opened in June of 1995 to hordes of visitors eager to celebrate Oregon City's history. Though patronage dropped off considerably after the first year, the museum continued to draw over 70,000 visitors annually. This kept the museum in the black until 2009. In the wake of the recession, budget cuts and a steep drop-off in attendance left the museum unable to meet its operating costs and it closed. Four years later, with fresh white canvas covering the wagons, the Interpretative Center reopened in a more stable local economy, boasting new exhibits and features.

The Interpretive Center has been open for almost three hours, but I am the first visitor of the day, the docent tells me. The museum is unnervingly quiet. Every footstep echoes as I circle the first wagon, made to represent Independence, Missouri. The room is bright, with a row of windows casting sunlight onto sacks of grain stacked high, a wheelbarrow parked in the corner, and modest clothing hung on display. This is the start of the Trail, offering a glimpse of what the pioneers left behind—by the state of things, it doesn't look like much.

I walk straight through wagon number two, to the Oregon Territory in the final wagon. The room is wood-paneled and windowless, built to resemble a barn with yet even more grain sacks in the rafters. In each corner of the room, each nook, there are staged scenes of domestic life, with photos of unknown persons, a diary propped open on a desk, and a spinning wheel threaded with wool next to a wood-burning stove. It feels cozy and inviting. These tableaux imagine the best of pioneer life—quaint and sterilized. There is nothing said of the sick and starving; the isolation and anxiety of beginning anew in a strange and distant place. It feels so earnest and hopeful that it's hard to not feel a sense of pride when thinking of those that made that difficult journey, to lay the foundation of this town, this state.

Some might say the story of the settlers starts in 1804, with the Lewis and Clark expedition to survey the land that was then beyond America's borders, to stake it out ahead of the British. This serves as only the preface to what

missionaries mark as the true beginning when, in 1832, four Native American men traveled east to St. Louis, perhaps covering the same ground as Lewis and Clark had. The men stood before General Clark and stated the purpose for their journey. They had come, they said, for “the white man’s Book of Heaven.”

Following this, a letter was published in the *Christian Advocate* to preach to the Native tribes of the Pacific Northwest. It called for “two suitable men, unencumbered with families and possessing the spirit of martyrs, [to] throw themselves into the nation, live with them, learn their language, preach Christ to them...”

The desire of these four men—reported as members of the Flathead or Nez Perce tribe, depending on the source—became an open-ended invitation west for the first missionaries. The first to arrive were the Methodists, closely followed in 1836 by Presbyterian missionaries Marcus Whitman and Henry Spalding, traveling with their two brides—Narcissa Whitman and Eliza Spalding, the first two white women to cross the Rockies. They needed a wagon for the women to rest on the long journey overland. This wagon—Whitman’s wagon—is used as a symbol for his rugged determination, as he led it over mountains and rivers, refusing to abandon it at the request of all in his party.

He was said to have evoked it during a meeting with the president and Secretary of State Webster, who had been quite vocal in his opposition to purchasing the Oregon Territory, asking the Senate: “What do we want with the vast, worthless area, the region of savages and wild beasts...?” A painting imagines this meeting, with Whitman himself looking like a wild beast standing

aggressively before the Secretary and a frightened looking President Tyler, suggesting the alleged tense exchange Webster declared it impossible to travel over the Rockies with a wagon. Whitman interrupted to insist: “There is a wagon road, for I have made it.” In the image, a sunbeam shines through a nearby window, spotlighting the doctor dressed in fraying furs. There is something religious in the illumination, with Whitman as a Jesus-like figure, giving the impassioned speech that would be credited with swaying President Tyler and therefore, “saving” Oregon from the British. As with the Native Americans who passed a winter in St. Louis with General Clark, the framework of the story is true but obscured by decades of embellishment. If any credit is to be given to Whitman in the establishment of the Oregon Territory, it came in the wake of his death.

In the fall of 1847, a measles epidemic spread in the region, hitting the Native American tribes particularly hard. Nearly 200 Cayuse died during the outbreak, of a population estimated between 500 and 800 strong. With five to six Cayuse dying daily, questions arose over Whitman’s treatment of the victims at Waiilatpu, his mission his near modern-day Walla Walla, Washington. There is a story that the Cayuse devised a test for Whitman, sending two men—one sick and the other only appearing sick. The premise was simple: if the healthy man was declared sick and treated, they would know that Whitman was not to be trusted. It would confirm suspicions that Whitman was not attempting to cure the sick Cayuse, but slowly eliminating them, to take the land and make room for white,

Christian occupants. When both of the patients died after measles exposure, Whitman failed the test. This was said to be the impetus for the ambush that took place on the morning of November 29th, 1847. Whitman and his wife died, along with 11 others.

In the wake of the attack against the Whitmans, Joe Meek—trapper and cousin-in-law to President Polk—was hired as a messenger to Congress to request territorial government, giving the settlers legal grounds to retaliate. Acquisition of the land had been debated for years in the nation's capital, mired by arguments over borders that were finally resolved with the enactment of "Oregon Treaty" in 1846, settling the border dispute with the British. With America's claim on the Oregon Territory settled, leaders in Washington, D.C. seemed to forget about the region entirely until Meek arrived with the news of the massacre. Shortly after Meek's account of the violence, Congress was swift to act, passing legislation in the summer of 1848 to install territorial government in Oregon.

In 1987 the Oregon House and Senate turned their attention to Oregon City, what had been the territorial seat of government, with a house bill designating the town as the end of the Oregon Trail. The title had been erroneously given to Seaside in 1926. While the coastal town was the end of Lewis and Clark Trail, only a negligible number of pioneers continued to travel west of the Willamette Valley. The bill became law with little opposition from lawmakers; however, residents of The Dalles followed with protests publicly hanging effigies of representatives who had voted in favor. The Dalles, an important trading post

along the Columbia, had claimed to be the trail's end for years. Indeed, there were over 15 westward trails documented. The trail to Oregon City was the road most traveled by.

Oregon City leaned into this new claim to fame. City-wide, it became more invested and proud of its pioneer history than it had been in previous years. Summer of 1987 alone brought Pioneer Days, a multi-day celebration of settlers; "Oregon Fever," an original historical drama about traveling the trail; and Clackamas County Museum's exhibit of the Great Migration. Lawmakers were already thinking of tourism, including funding in the bill for Oregon City to establish a permanent museum dedicated to the Oregon Trail. The End of the Trail Interpretative Center was built where a modest gazebo had stood, marking the historical site.

A staff member shuffles into the Oregon room. She is wearing a long apron tied at the waist to hide her leggings and cowboy boots. She's been sent to inform me that the movie is starting in the auditorium—which fills the middle wagon—where I'm joined by a family of six. The half-hour length film stands as the centerpiece of the exhibit, re-enacting excerpts taken from letters and diaries written along the trail. The soundtrack swells with a catchy folk guitar-and-banjo number proudly proclaiming the pioneers to be "bound for the promised land." The inhabitants of the promised land are represented, with the Native American perspective of Manifest Destiny peppering the narrative. The attempt at

inclusivity strikes a sour note, with the voiceover delivered in exaggerated “Native” accent rising above the sound of drumming and chanting.

The film is narrated by a hologram of John McLoughlin—rather, an actor portraying the “Father of Oregon.” McLoughlin is chosen here, the docent explained, as an eyewitness to the migration, to the growing wagon trains and ever-expanding settlement he named “Oregon City.” Though he wasn’t just a witness. He was something of an ambassador—greeting settlers, offering a place to rest, and outfitting them on credit with food and supplies for the last leg of their journey. His near life-size image is projected next to a taxidermy beaver, a nod to both his, and the state’s, beginnings in the fur trade. McLoughlin gazes off into the distance as he recalls the hundreds of settlers coming overland: “They were dreamers.”

Meek may have wished he were dreaming when he passed the Whitman mission on his route to Washington, D.C. He was among the first to glimpse the scene of the crime. He described his findings in a letter to Narcissa’s brother, Jonah, the following summer: “They were murdered in November but were not found (and consequently not buried) until late in the month of March. I myself conducted the melancholy rites, and a solemn one it was. The head of Mrs. W was severed from her body, and other portions of her [remains] scattered in various directions. The body of Dr. W, however, was whole...” Among the remains was Meek’s daughter, then age 10, who died from measles exposure in the days

following the violence. It's unclear if Meek was aware of that hers was among the bodies he and his men buried in an unmarked grave.

It's thought that dismemberment was a sign that animals had disturbed the bodies; however, some have called this the work of Joe Lewis, a shadowy but persistent figure at the perimeter of the massacre, of whom little is known. He arrived the year prior, passing the winter at the mission. There are accounts of Whitman outfitting Lewis with clothing and giving him work as well as reports that he had overstayed his welcome and Whitman wished him to leave. A witness had claimed to have seen Lewis at Wailatpu, cleaving in two the skulls of Mr. and Mrs. Whitman, already dead.

Lewis is consistently referred to as a "half-breed." Neither white nor Native, he is distinctly Other—separate and unconnected. During the measles epidemic, Lewis was employed by Whitman as a coffin-maker. He would have known better than most the devastating scope of the disease, and it is commonly thought that Lewis, in order to claim the land for himself, had planted the seed that Whitman was poisoning his Cayuse patients. Others, including Henry Spalding, credited the Jesuits, who had recently established a mission in the area, with stirring suspicions. A young witness to the violence echoed this distrust when describing the day after the killings: "I was frightened when the Catholic Priest came as he said to see if they were buried decently. I felt afraid of him more than all the Indians."

Ultimately, the Cayuse were deemed responsible and the Territory, along with the aid of the militia, entered in a war with the tribe. After two and half

years, Chief Tawatoe, or Young Chief as he was called, was presented with a letter. In it, the names of the Cayuse said to have carried out the massacre were listed, taken from eyewitness account. The same list of names had been widely circulated among troops as the perpetrators. While the total number involved is unknown, there were five names that remained on the list, said to be the only involved in the massacre that were still living. They were: Tomahas, Telokite, Isiaasheluckas, Clokomas, and Kiamasumkin. Hoping to end the war, they were surrendered to authorities by Young Chief.

The men were escorted by river to Oregon City, the seat of government in the territory. The men were indicted on only one charge: the murder of Marcus Whitman. *The Spectator*, Oregon City's first newspaper, described the mood during the May 21st, 1850 proceedings: "The solemnity and stillness of a church characterized the courtroom..." As it was, in the absence of a courthouse, the church was briefly considered as a trial venue, it being one of the few buildings that could comfortably hold the hundreds expected to fill the galley. The idea was dismissed as improper, and Oregon's first formal judicial proceedings took place in a tavern. The judge traveled to the Territory without his black robe and had to borrow the reverend's for the occasion. The prisoners were kept in chains during the proceedings. All written communication was presented in English, in handwritten script, which the defendants were unlikely able to read even if familiar with written English. When a signature was required of the defendants on any of the court documents—which were found in a drawer in 1933, a little

musty but remarkably well-preserved—five Xs stand in place. On the afternoon of May 24th, 1850, four days after the trial began, Judge Pratt handed down the sentence: death by hanging.

Joe Meek, as marshal, acted as the executioner for those convicted of killing his friends and his daughter. When one of the five men was still alive 14 minutes after hanging, “to help him along, Joe Meek used the toe of his boot to tighten the rope.” Like the Whitmans at Waiilatpu, the men were buried in an unmarked grave. The location of the grave was described in 1925 by the son of the Meek’s assistant, who helped dispose of the bodies “up Abernethy Road, on the right, hardly a half-mile from Abernethy Bridge.” These coordinates lead to the End of the Trail, across the parking lot from the museum, in the shadow of those hulking wagons.

Taking last looks at daguerreotypes of prominent pioneers and a case filled with a cobbler’s rusting tools, I am nearing the museum’s exit. I watch the mother scold her sons for running circles around the room, and only then do I realize how big the space is and how little fills it. The warmth of the wood-paneled walls, the cozy cabin scene with the wood stove that almost seems to give off heat, distracts from just how empty the room is. There is one last display in the corner, behind a children’s play area, viewable after climbing a few steps. These informational panels—interrupted by the LED screen of the thermostat—are dedicated to the tribes of the region—particularly, the Clackamas. It is a part of the display, part of the story of the pioneers; and yet, at the same time, it is

entirely separate. There are a few brief notes on canoes, how they fished, and cultural beliefs, with descriptions on traditional head binding beginning in infancy, sloping the forehead backward to convey status and identity.

There is nothing that speaks to the uncertainty facing the tribes as the settlers poured into the valley. There is nothing of what was to come—the dwindling numbers, the diminishing lands, the forced relocation to reservations, and the loss of culture and tradition. The geographic positioning both in the display and narrative make the inclusion of the tribes feel like an afterthought, a footnote in the larger, more important story. As I walk across the empty parking lot, I look to the field just beyond and think about the unmarked grave of the Cayuse.

Talking With Ghosts

William Becker's delicate 14K gold crucifix peeks out from his blue polo shirt, catching the late afternoon sun as he stands, greeting the half-dozen people who have arrived for his class—Finding Your Psychic Voice. Becker, 60, has been working as a psychic medium professionally for seven years. He believes in ghosts—the non-living, as he jokes—because he sees them, he says, and has interacted with time for most his life. In spite of the crucifix, Becker isn't much of a believer in the Holy Ghost. The necklace is both souvenir and sentimental, a reminder of the radical change in course that took him from would-be professor to the priesthood to the paranormal. "This lifetime seems to be one of re-inventing myself," he says, breaking into a smile.

1.

Psychic visions aren't a gift, Becker asserts. Rather, he believes they are an ability—one that can be developed with practice. To that end, Becker holds a monthly class in his favorite coffee shop, leading students through a series of meditative exercises designed to summon spirits or shield against paranormal energy. Customers parade in, ordering cappuccinos, followed shortly by the clang of the cash drawer. While not ideal, Becker's choice of venue is deliberate. "I hold classes in places with ghosts because if we're trying to talk to ghosts, it helps if they're around," he says.

Downtown Oregon City is ripe with folklore. Few bat an eye at the suspicions of spirits in the brick buildings that line Main Street—some of the oldest structures in the state. A particularly pervasive legend is one of a little boy seen milling about Singer Creek, the source of a typhoid outbreak in 1913. Some people report to having seen or heard him in the tunnels branching off of the Grand Staircase, the shallow steps built into the basalt cliffside, connecting the bluffs to downtown. He's thought to be featured in a mural of early life in Oregon City, as the young boy standing on the riverbank, wiping his mouth, presumably having just drunk from the river—a foreshadowing to the illness that would befall him.

Becker listened to this story on a walking tour of Oregon City's most haunted places. He, his father, and his sister joined the tour on a lark. As their guide described the ghost as a red-haired boy, Becker interrupted, shouting out: "That's Carl Green!" The forgotten memory came rushing back, when eight-year-old Becker—known then as Billy—walked with his younger sister and friends through the McLoughlin neighborhood on a mild spring day some four decades before. Becker stood at the top of the staircase and spied on the landing, 15-feet away, a boy close to him in age. The boy had reddish hair and was dressed kind of funny, he thought. Young Becker turned to his friend and asked if he could invite the red-headed boy to play with them. "No, that's Carl Green," the boy replied. "He's dead."

This, Becker says, was the first time he saw a ghost.

* * *

Becker is poised while facilitating the class. He is warm and friendly, offering paternal reminders to drink water—"the most important thing with psychic work is to stay hydrated." He carefully considers each question raised, holding his hands in front of him with his fingertips pressed together, drawing attention to his long, neatly rounded fingernails. Becker is encouraging to students as they struggle—we're just establishing a practice, he says, emphasizing the final word.

Becker had considered education as a career path. His mother was a grade-school librarian and his father taught at the high school level—mostly history. Becker shares his father's keen interest in history, saying there was no moment when he began to love it—he just always had. "I loved every bit of it—the older the better," he says. His father indulged his curiosity with annual summer vacations of cross-country drives to national parks and monuments, and of course, battlefields. Being there, smelling the grass at Bunker Hill made the history more accessible. This is what he wants for his students, to teach them "how to open up to more than just remnants of the history that's there but when you can see the action on the battlefield, when you can see the lady sipping tea in the drawing room, it adds to the richness of life and makes the history even more alive."

The remote region of the Volga came alive, as Grandma Becker described family unknown to him, the small succession of villages where she had grown up. These stories were a part of every day life for his family. Becker felt, even from a

young age, the importance of family history, of knowing his roots. His grandmother's detailed descriptions of landscape and distance came from a map she had drawn to preserve what she could of the village that she knew would be forever altered, as the Germans were driven from the Volga region. Becker saw the map for the first time last summer, kept on display in a historical society, as he visited Russia.

Walking the same ground as his grandmother was an overwhelming experience for Becker. Some of the villages he knew from her stories were in ruins. In the remnants of the schoolhouse, Becker says that he had an emotional talk with his grandmother. He left feeling closer to her, feeling a kinship to the defiant young woman—married and pregnant—who emigrated to the United States, against her family's wishes. "It makes me feel more rebellious in a sense," he says. In the year since his trip, Becker wrote a book marrying the personal history with memories of grandmother, the paranormal—which factors into all of his written work—and the history of Volga Germans and genocide.

Becker is a historian by training, earning his Bachelor's from Oregon State University, with a particular interest in ancient civilizations. "With a little more focus, he could have been a notable historian," one friend says. Becker agrees, saying if he could do it over again, he would have stuck with his original plan to become a history professor. But he's happy with the teaching he does. He's excited by the sensations and visions his students report, as their confidence in their own ability grows. Becker describes himself as a skeptical person. Part of his

own confidence in the paranormal—in his psychic abilities—is due in large part to research he performs to confirm a vision, as he says.

2.

One area of study that Becker is particularly interested in is transition—the beginnings of the slow change in place and culture that can unfold over hundreds of years. For Becker, those beginnings came in high school, when he first felt drawn toward a life of study and spirituality. He was not religious, reared in a family of non-practicing Lutherans. He wasn't even sure if he believed in God. In spite of the uncertainty, the doubt he felt, he thought often of becoming a monk.

He went to college instead; he traveled and worked. But, at 40, this desire resurfaced. Thinking this was a sign of needing a spiritual outlet, he practiced Vipassanā meditation and began spiritual direction with a Trappist monk. But it wasn't enough. He started RICA classes—The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults—to learn, and convert to, Catholicism. In spite of some of the political differences he had with the Catholic Church, he became more deeply connected to it. Becker found a parish liberal enough for his liking and went to mass regularly. Months later, he decided he would become a priest—"a Dorothy Day priest."

"I just had to try it," he says. He gave the same response to friends, who asked why he joined the church. He lost some friends who couldn't understand why Becker, as a liberal gay agnostic, was so determined to become a priest.

“There is a progressive piece of the church that’s very social justice-minded,” he says, and this is the piece that most appealed to him, that motivated him.

He was accepted into Marylhurst, a private Portland-area Catholic university, to begin coursework for a Master’s in Theology. Without prior religious education, he was required to take two years of pre-theology courses before formally beginning at the graduate-level. Becker wasn’t daunted by the extra work. He was motivated by the surety that this was where he needed to be. With all of these steps in place, Becker started his Master’s program in August, 2001. The following February, he was kicked out.

His favorite professor told him to take it as a compliment, but Becker couldn’t get past the shock, the confusion. He was doing well academically, he rationalized—what other reason could they have? “I think my sexual orientation had something to do with it—I’m quite sure of it,” he says. He recalls that the President-Rector telling him ominously that everything is considered with regard to formation—conversations overheard or say, gossip. Shortly thereafter, he was dismissed, considered to be unformable.

“It was pretty traumatic in some ways, being kicked out,” he says. “I thought this was where I was going,” having already invested so much in laying the groundwork. The questions piled up: What would he do now? What would his life look like now, as a layperson? Would he date? Did he remember how? Not yet ready to face the uncertainty, he bought a plane ticket to Hungary and for the next month, the seminary, the life he planned, was a world away.

* * *

The Church seemed like the only option for a contemplative life for Becker. When he left seminary, he wasn't sure if he would continue to practice. He was worried that without going to mass he wouldn't feel connected to his spirituality. He says travel, visiting ancient places, has had the same effect as religion. "Some aspects of the sacraments can also take one to the same spiritual depth and place that some of the Neolithic, Iron Age, Bronze Age, Celtic sites can," he says. "You can find these places on your own—that's part of the psychic world that I live in and explore."

3.

Becker had been practicing as a psychic on and off for years, giving readings to friends at cost. He hadn't considered it as a career path until traveling north to Wellington, Washington, site of the deadliest avalanche to date. In the winter of 1910, a blizzard raged for nine days. Two trains stopped on the tracks, brought a stand-still for days while the snow piled up. The weather warmed suddenly, causing lightning strikes—one knocking loose a slab of snow a half-mile wide. The snow gathered speed as it moved down the mountainside, left bare after a recent wildfire. The avalanche hurtled toward the valley. The trains broke apart on impact, the wreckage coming to rest 150-feet below the tracks and under 40 feet of snow. The final body count wasn't revealed until the summer thaw, when authorities counted 96 casualties.

Little remains of Wellington, renamed Tye in the months after the accident. A second tunnel through the Cascades rerouted trains away from Wellington's depot. The town was abandoned in 1929. There are reminders of the disaster at Wellington with rusting metal debris strewn about the forest, and the nine-mile concrete snowshed built in the aftermath of the avalanche, the ruins of which now function as a stretch of hiking trail, particularly popular with paranormalists like Becker and his small party. When they reached the concrete ribcage of the snowshed, signaling the location where the trains had been swept off the tracks, everyone stopped and looked at Becker expectantly. What came that day—the names and occupations of some of the passengers killed in the accident—impressed the most ardent and self-proclaimed critics in his party. This was confirmation enough for Becker that he was good enough to be a psychic medium professionally.

After seminary, Becker moved home to Oregon City to care for his elderly parents. He was in his early 50s when they passed away. He was uncertain about his prospects—due both to his age and a resume that was a mosaic of retail, non-profits, government, and tour guide jobs, as he had begun to work occasionally with NW Ghost Tours. Bolstered by the encouragement he'd received at Wellington, Becker started Paranormal Insights, where he offers psychic readings, mentoring, and workshops.

For Becker, there are no smoke and mirrors with his psychic work. There is no theatrical production. He will either close his eyes or gaze off into the

distance with soft, unfocused eyes and let the pictures come to him. One of Becker's closest friends describes him this way: "He has a strong imagination, capable of envisioning sand castles and all but move in." She admits she doesn't believe in psychics, generally, but she believes him, knowing him to be genuine and kind. Sometimes the images are just flashes or fragments, and other times, they're detailed, unfolding over several minutes. He admits his greatest fear is drawing a blank, though "something always comes." Something always leaves, too. He holds firm boundaries with entities—they are not to visit uninvited. Sometimes he's frustrated with psychics who claim to be bothered by ghosts at all times. "Just hang up," he says. "Say good-bye."

Even with boundaries, he says he often encounters shy entities. There's Carlos, an image that comes as a full-bodied apparition. Becker says he sees Carlos milling about Main Street, hiding in corners or following a safe distance behind. "I think he has a little crush on me," he says with a smile. He suspects that Carlos was likely gay and unable to show this side of himself. This may be why he's appearing to Becker—a man of another era who lives as an openly gay man. Becker speaks of Carlos so tenderly, it's quite easy to forget that he's talking about a ghost and not a friend of his.

He is grandfatherly not just in appearance—dressed, at times, in period clothes: an ascot, a vest, a pork pie atop his silver hair—but in his warm demeanor. He delivers messages from ghosts to loved ones on his cable access show, gently relaying the ghost's plea to quit smoking or to exercise more. He speaks softly, slowly, carefully choosing every word. His tone is so even that

Becker's jokes and sly comments would go unnoticed if he didn't immediately break into a wide smile, half-shielded by his silver mustache.

Becker has become a well-known figure in paranormal circles. He's a frequent guest at conferences, including the Oregon Ghost Conference—the largest paranormal event in the Northwest—which he co-founded. He is known for his investigatory trips to haunted hot spots across the Pacific Northwest, such as the Walker-Ames House, which is regarded by paranormalists as the most haunted house in Washington state, attracting hundreds of visitors every year. He has self-published books about his psychic encounters, offering what context he can about locations and persons.

For Becker, the relationship between the past and the paranormal isn't just one of history and research. The paranormal, as he sees it, can play a role in preservation. Becker has been active in efforts to save the historic Ermatinger house. A fellow employee of the Hudson's Bay Company, Francis Ermatinger built his house on land deeded to him by John McLoughlin in 1845. It is, by most measures, the oldest house in Oregon City—predating neighbor McLoughlin's house by only months. It's thought that the famous spat between Francis Pettygrove and Asa Lovejoy was resolved in Ermatinger's parlor with a toss of the "Portland penny."

The house was moved to higher ground from its original location near the falls in 1910, and it became a rental. In 1977 the house was spotted by its

awkward rectangular shape in the earliest photograph of Oregon City, taken in 1857. Preservationist Ruth McBride Powers purchased the house, moved it to yet another lot, and restored it. Becker and his colleague tried to continue Powers' work as caretakers and when significant structural damage was found, they applied for grants to fund repairs. As of 2014, the house has been stabilized but is still not open to the public. If the city follows through on relinquishing the property to the Park Service, Becker won't be needed as a caretaker. He would miss the quiet moments in the house, alone. His eyes widen as he recalls a doll in the children's room moving around the room, from one piece of furniture to another. Becker sees himself as promoting preservation through his work as a medium, saying: "The ghost history, the paranormal history, overlaid with history, is a great way to get people involved and interested."

Becker wants to do more to preserve the historical character of Oregon City. He casually recounts the historical significance of Oregon City being the site of the west coast's first mill, first newspaper, and even the first distillery. He can trace his mother's family line to coming overland in 1867—150 years of familial history. He's watched the city change as he, in turn, has changed—a personal transformation that has taken him from burgeoning scholar to seminarian to something that feels like a comfortable middle. He threatens to move but knows he won't any time soon, having inherited his parents' house—just a stone's throw from the dead-end street he grew up on. His criticisms of local government and the conservative political climate reflect his affinity for his hometown, and his

hope that it lives up to the potential he sees in it. As he looks out the window of his favorite haunted coffee shop, it's hard to imagine Becker living anywhere else.

In the Stacks

The crinkle of Mylar as the front cover opens, the waft of musty paper, revealing its age, and the signs of other, and fellow, readers having dog-eared the pages or left errant pencil markings. The tag affixed to the inside back cover bears years of stamped due dates, reflecting just how loved this title has been. This is the moment where I pause, savoring that feeling of anticipation. Taking up the book, now mine for three weeks, I would hear the faint echo: *Captured and carried off to myself.*

Eudora Welty loved books long before she could read. She thought of them as natural wonders, as organic and ever-present as grass. She wrote in her autobiography: “I cannot remember a time when I was not in love with them—with the books themselves, their cover and binding and the paper they were printed on, with their smell and their weight and with their possession in my arms, captured and carried off to myself.”

It started with Eudora Welty, with spying on a low shelf the olive-colored lettering on the cream cover of the Modern Library’s *Selected Short Stories of Eudora Welty*. It felt good in my hands, as I fanned the pages. Printed on scitita paper, it made the most satisfying snapping sound as I turned the page. That motion, that sound, it was declarative. It captured my attention before I read even a single word. I read this book numerous times while in my possession, poring over stories like “The Whistle,” so quietly dark and ominous. At 13, this

was my first brush with literature, with a Pulitzer prize-winning author, and I was hooked.

I walk among the wide rows of bookshelves on second-story of the newly expanded Oregon City Public Library. Sunlight pours in through the nearly floor-to-ceiling windows, standing in stark contrast to the boxy, windowless, perpetually dim library of my youth. As I make note of the changes, I look up to see the familiar face of the librarian. I find myself beaming at her, surprised to see this familiar face. She only smiles politely in return. My excitement at being in the library, at seeing her, overcomes me and I forget she wouldn't recognize me. It's been at least 15 years since she greeted me by name as I walked into the library's front doors.

My first trip to a public library is a vibrant early memory, one that is filled with joy and wonder—entirely reflective of how I would regard the public library system the duration of my childhood and into adulthood. There are two men responsible for my love of public libraries—Zachariah J. Loussac and my dad.

Loussac was a Jewish engineering student who attracted the wrong kind of attention with his reading habits and, fearing banishment to Siberia, he fled Tsarist Russia in 1907, boarding a steamer ship bound for Nome, Alaska. He spent the next several years criss-crossing the Territory of Alaska before settling in Anchorage in 1916, where he opened a pharmacy. He served two terms as mayor, and began the Loussac Foundation, "dedicated to the promotion of

recreational, cultural, scientific or educational activities in the Anchorage area.” The eponymous foundation underwrote the new building for the city’s first public library in 1951, which was torn down 30 years later, replaced with the larger Z.J. Loussac Public Library in 1986. A bronze replica of Loussac stands outside of the library, a top hat and cane in one hand and a pair of books cradled in the other.

My family took weekly trips to the Loussac. With my dad parked at a wooden table, his thick Chemistry or Anatomy and Physiology textbooks propped open in front of him, the library became something of a playground for me and my older sister. While my sister piled books up to her chin, my dad also went exploring in the stacks. As he remembers: “We had no money and enjoyed watching the videos made by University of Alaska Fairbanks.” Our family of five assembled in the living room of our small, eternally dim apartment and learned about the history of Alaska, the Gold Rush, and Soapy Smith. “As newcomers, we knew more about Alaska than many that had lived there for years, because we watched all of those videos.” The library connected us—particularly my dad—to this new place.

We were not the only newcomers that sought solace in a library. In spring of 1843, just ahead of the Great Migration to the Willamette Valley, W.H. Gray held a meeting with his fellow white settlers at The Falls, what is now known as Oregon City. Gray proposed beginning a lending library built from the titles that made it overland. They added to this collection with funds raised through selling shares. And so began the Multnomah Circulating Library. Two years later, the

library was incorporated by the provisional governing body, making it the first library west of the Rockies. The first action from the provisional government was to officially recognize the town, and then its library.

With the establishment of Oregon Territory, federal funding poured into the library to the tune of \$5,000—most of which was spent on handsome new books. They built an impressive law collection, with legal documents and court records, and expanded by 750 works of fiction, history, and poetry. These books would be in their possession for only a short time, as the library, so stipulated by the federal law, belonged in the seat of territorial government. By 1852, that was no longer Oregon City. The library's collection was packed up and moved south to Salem. Oregon City would not have a public library again until 1913, with the opening of the Carnegie-funded library built in the center of a city park on John Adams Street.

By the time I had moved to Oregon City, the library was not as revered as it had been by the pioneers. Oregon City Public Library had vacated its beautiful red brick building centered on a city block of lush green grass. The sight of this building both excited and angered me. It looked like an ideal library—warm and welcoming but with a serious scholarly edge. It angered me given where the library was currently housed, having outgrown the old building and failing to garner community support to fund the construction of a new one.

The library had instead landed at the end of a strip mall attached to a Thiftway grocery store. The surrounding landscape was dotted with all the usual

suspects: a take-and-bake pizzeria, a pet supply store, a tax preparer, and a video rental. The library shared a wall with Top Flyte, a gymnastics studio. In the quiet corner where poetry was kept, I could hear the rhythms of the music, of feet meeting the floor in tumbling routines, interrupted by the coach's shrill whistle and the command to 'do it again.'

It was far from ideal, but at 13,000 square feet, it was more than twice the size of the Carnegie. This location was temporary, I heard time and time again from the librarian. I think she said this for her own benefit, to assure herself that she wouldn't have to spend much longer in the dark and charmless carpeted warehouse. She was wrong. OCPL was forced to renew its lease twice more, bringing the total time served to 15 years. It may very well have been longer had the property not been sold and the building demolished to make way for an even larger grocery store and adjoining strip mall. Without anywhere else to go, the library returned to its Carnegie building.

Unable to afford the \$2 membership for the local library, Andrew Carnegie, at 17, wrote a letter to the *Pittsburgh Dispatch* offering the opinion that the library ought to be free of cost from young working boys like himself. The letter caught the attention of Colonel James Anderson of Pittsburgh, who every Saturday afternoon invited "working boys" into his 400-volume private library. Each young man could take out any book of his choosing to exchange the following week for another title. Carnegie was grateful to Colonel Anderson and his generosity for the duration of his life, erecting a statue in Pittsburgh in his

honor. He would credit Colonel Anderson for this time and time again, in introducing him to the essays of Charles Lamb and Thomas Macaulay: “[T]o him I owe a taste in literature which I would not exchange for all the millions that were amassed by man.”

Of course, Carnegie had amassed millions, and he used his vast fortune as he believed all men of wealth should: he gave it back. He considered the ways in which philanthropy could benefit the community, though the addition of hospitals, schools, churches, and public parks. “What is the best gift which can be given to a community?” Carnegie asked in “The Gospel of Wealth,” his 1889 manifesto on charitable giving. In the top slot, most beneficial anywhere, is a free library, on the condition, he adds, “the community will accept and maintain it as a public institution, as much a part of the city property as its public schools...” For young Carnegie, the books he greedily read from Colonel Anderson’s library, in stolen moments at his post at the telegraph office, were his only education.

Like Carnegie, my education centered around reading. I didn’t go to school, opting instead for a correspondence program from the age of twelve onward. Lacking the interest and self-discipline to attend school-by-mail, the whole endeavor devolved into five years of teenage truancy. Unbeknownst to me at the time, my education chugged on, becoming a self-guided pursuit, largely through reading. I, too, would come to understand the library as my schoolhouse, these delves into the stacks as courses, when I happened upon a peculiar title still

sitting on the shelving cart—*The Teenage Liberation Handbook: How to Quit School and Get a Real Life and Education*.

Former high school English teacher, Grace Llewellyn, “stood on the shoulders of a giant” in the writing of this book, an inspiring take on alternative education. The giant in question was John Holt, who, through his *Growing Without Schooling* magazine, introduced an educational model he called “unschooling.” It was the counterpart to homeschooling, its mirrored reflection. It favored student-directed learning through play, exploration, and experimentation. Llewellyn married this philosophy with a practical guide for teenagers, with chapters offering advice on talking about alternative education with parents, finding internships, and applying to college. Thinking about education by way of the library cast these trips in a different light. I felt compelled to move beyond the safe, comfortable aisles of fiction into history, science, biography, poetry, and beyond. My black library card, with its hand-drawn lion’s head at the center, acted as passport, allowing me access to any far-flung place.

The world I inhabited every day was rather small. As a teenager, I lived in isolation on a sprawling Christmas tree farm six miles outside of Oregon City. I rarely had occasion to speak to anyone outside of my family. The library was an exception to this, as staff came to know me and to make recommendations. Any trip “into town,” and I would beg to be dropped at the library. Even with only a few minutes, I could dash in, scan the bookshelves, the movie shelf, and be guaranteed to leave with something interesting.

In bookstores, I would wander the aisles endlessly. I would read and re-read the back cover, the opening page, and then return it to the shelf. I would pinball back and forth between the books I was considering. If allowed, I would perform for hours this awkward dance, this ritual of doubt. Buying a book came with anxiety. Not having much money, I felt pressure to choose wisely, carefully, since it would be months before I could buy another. I wanted a guarantee, a promise that it would be something I would connect with and—with so few books on my own shelf—that it would stand up to multiple readings.

I didn't experience anxiety in choosing at the library. I grabbed greedily, blindly, at anything that caught my eye. In spite of the miserable environs, the library remained a constant beam of light for me. Every trip promised the discovery of something new, something unknown. I liked the surprise. I liked the adventure, the hunt. This was another unexpected gift from Carnegie.

To save costs, Carnegie suggested a new approach. Gone was the old model—the librarian receiving the request for a specific book, kept secreted away from the public. In its place would be a great, imposing desk situated just inside of the door, where the librarian could keep a watchful eye on those coming and going, and on the books—which now filled the room in the open-shelf, self-serve model we use today. With unfettered access, patrons could roam and browse on their own accord. I stumbled over titles I wouldn't have encountered otherwise: *The Ladies of the Corridor*, a long out-of-print play co-written by Dorothy Parker, and Frances Farmer's posthumously published autobiography. I found stories that reflected my isolation (*Into the Forest*, *Girl*, *Interrupted*, and *The*

Singing Creek Where the Willows Grow) and soothed my loneliness for as long as I inhabited them. I cast my wide net across poetry, pulling in Pablo Neruda, Alexander Pope, and César Vallejo.

Shortly after I checked out Anne Sexton's *Love Poems*, I found on a shelf of odd-shaped items—such as, the imposing plastic clamshells of collected works of Rimsky-Korsakov—a cassette of Anne Sexton and Her Kind, the jazz-infused ensemble she fronted, setting her poems to music. Her intimate poetry was made more intimate when hearing it in her deep, droning voice flecked with her New England accent. Later, I returned to find Gwendolyn Brooks and Sylvia Plath. How many of Sylvia Plath's poems had I read without ever once hearing her voice?

The internet offers a bounty of poets reading their work, some including video, but at the time I was discovering these things, the internet was still in its infancy. Searches through Lycos or AltaVista returned sparse results that often missed the mark. Through the library, I ferreted out things I wouldn't have encountered otherwise. I'm reminded of that unconsidered find each time I stumble across things like James Mason reading *Lolita*, so heavily abridged as to fit onto an LP, or Anaïs Nin reading excerpts from her diary. It is a charming and disorienting experience, after reading her diaries—accidentally mislaid under Fiction—to learn, as her voice fills the room, with her thick French accent the word comes out sounding like “dowry.”

I sit at a handsome dark table just inside of the Carnegie, the original building serving as something of a foyer to the new, and larger, library. This is the first time I've ever set foot inside the handsome building I've admired so often from the outside. July sunlight floods into the room through picture windows that match the exact specifications of Carnegie's secretary, James Betram, who in an effort to ensure the grant money was used effectively took to approving the designs of each applicant. The wood-slat floors that creak underfoot, the armchairs clustered around a red brick fireplace that anchors the room, and the dark wood beams criss-crossing the ceiling, creating a naughts-and-crosses board, serve as echoes of the library's early days.

I am thinking about its beginning, spearheaded by the Women's League in 1909, when a young librarian comes into the room, leading a group of disinterested teenagers on a tour. She moves the group to the corner, gesturing to the framed painting of a silver-haired man posed in front of an open book. "This is Andrew Carnegie," she says. With her blue jeans and a pixie haircut, the librarian appears only moderately older than the handful of teenagers she addresses, who mill about, flipping through pages of open reference books, only half-listening as she says excitedly: "He built the library we're standing in!"

Carnegie, of course, underwrote the grant to build this library—and 30 others in Oregon, totaling roughly half a million dollars. The Oregon City library was one of the last built, completed in 1913. Today one-third of those buildings

remain in use as libraries. Though they vary in architectural styles, they are immediately recognizable by their shared features: the boxy shape, the brickwork, the staircase leading to the entrance representing an ascension to knowledge, and lamps or lampposts to symbolize the enlightenment achieved through reading. This sentiment was directly conveyed with the first Carnegie library commissioned in the steel magnate's hometown of Dunfermline, Scotland, with "let there be light" engraved above the library's entrance.

To qualify for the Carnegie grant, Oregon City, and the other beneficiaries had to provide the land on which to build, the books that would fill it, and annual operating costs, estimated as 10-percent of the total grant amount sought. A dedicated patronage, a library that could sustain itself, was vitality important to Carnegie, who saw the grant as not a gift, but seed money. "In bestowing charity, the main consideration should be to help those who will help themselves," he wrote in the "The Gospel of Wealth."

By 16, my trips to the library were daily. In the afternoons, I would take the bus from my new school to the library and wait for my step-dad to meet me on his way home from work. In the cold and wet winter months, damp from my walk from the bus stop, there was no better place than OCPL—dark and quiet. In the library I would sit in an upholstered chair, in a dim corner, coffee warming me through while I read for hours. I was just developing a taste for coffee of the overly sweet, milky variety. I approached this with the same vigor as I did the library, trying every flavor of latte, in search of just the right thing. There was

nothing more decadent than this, than losing myself in a narrative, losing all track of time and place. In some sense it didn't matter where it was housed. The library has always offered a kind of comfort that I've experienced nowhere else.

I wasn't aware of it at the time, but I was using the library in the same way my dad had done—searching all corners with abandon. Flipping through the CDs, grabbing at everything unfamiliar—which was almost everything. I moved through country classics like the Carter Family and George Jones and onto jazz with Miles Davis' *Kind of Blue*, still a favorite 20 years later. I explored the varied catalogue of Peggy Lee. I approached the library's collection of VHS tapes and, increasingly, DVDs with the same insatiable curiosity. They had all manner of obscure gems and forgotten favorites—silent films, classic TV, American independent films. I was particularly interested in the foreign section. As most patrons were trolling for new releases, the shelf of foreign films was a well that never ran dry. There was always something waiting to be discovered—Bergman, Truffaut, and—God help me—Fellini. I wasn't afraid to veer from the beaten path, having checked out every travel video the library owned—Spain, Germany, Argentina. Greece merited repeated viewings, with its images of Byzantine monasteries built atop cliffs, enveloped in fog, reflecting its name, Metéora—“Suspended in the air.” I kept digging and never hit bedrock.

Despite OCPL being one of the largest in the county, it was under constant threat of budget cuts that would reduce hours and staff. Long after I left Oregon City, it was difficult to watch the OCPL suffer debilitating budget cuts, from both

city and county. This, plus the failed funding measures resulted in further cuts, eliminating all children's programming and community events. Staffing was cut in half as were the hours. They were open 23 hours a week, while the patronage increased to more than 50,000. They were just limping along. Plans for a new library building were shelved. It may have languished forever in the strip mall had the property not been sold to make way for a newer, larger strip mall. The lease ended in 2010, and with no other option on the horizon, the library moved back into the too-small Carnegie, after 15 years away.

With the library's funding restored through a county-wide levy in 2008, and a healthy city general fund, they began to shop around for a new space. They briefly considered converting an old elementary school before looking again to build on an empty lot. The answer, Library Director Maureen Cole realized, was right under their noses.

Oregon City is the only Carnegie in the state to have expanded, building an additional 14,000 square feet onto its original. The expansion was completed in the fall of 2016, after only 25 years in the making. The two-story building was attached to the back of the Carnegie, with the first story bearing the same deep maroon Newberg brick, making the buildings feel cohesive. Moving from the Carnegie into the addition, it is spacious and bright. Skylights patterned with punctuation marks cast comma-shaped shadows on the wall. Stepping into the lobby, I'm reminded of the Loussac and its glass-encased entrance that ushers in

visitors. I wonder, with the symbolism in the Carnegie buildings, what might an atrium mean—the sky is the limit?

Upstairs, the floor-to-ceiling windows flood the room with light. I am surprised by the swell of emotion in seeing the library thriving, in seeing the librarian who had shown me such small kindnesses—her forgiveness of fines, her running commentary on what I had selected. These things mattered to me more she knew, more than I knew at the time. These exchanges, these little moments of recognition, offered even the briefest respite from loneliness.

Looking around the room, I find the decor betrays the refined, dignified Carnegie. I suppose after the windowless building with its beige interior, they might desire color. With the magenta walls, blue and lime-green accents peppering the interior, I am reminded of the Technicolor of Jacques Demy's 1964 musical *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*, each frame saturated with pink and green and blue. And then I remember discovering it in the library, checking out their VHS copy with such regularity that the librarian teased me.

"I've never seen anyone else check this out," she said. "You must be the only one."

Dime Store Desperado

Frank Smith was a slender man at 150 pounds, dressed stylishly in the black striped trousers he had stolen days before. The trousers, recognized by police as one of the items missing from a Portland-area store, led to his arrest on April 22nd, 1906. The next day, Smith and others were detained, unguarded, while awaiting their turn to be brought into the courtroom and hear the charges against them. Smith would never stand before a judge. He hoisted himself into an air duct, shimmying his way through the passage thought too narrow for anyone to pass. From there, he climbed a water pipe 50-feet to the roof, where he passed hand-over-hand across a taut electrical wire, from the Portland City Jail to the neighboring Worcester building. By chance Smith found an open window and slipped through. He walked through the Worcester building unnoticed, and out onto the corner of 3rd Avenue and Oak Street, blending into the downtown crowd. Smith had close to a half-hour lead before anyone even noticed he was missing. Dumbfounded guards grilled the inmates who had witnessed his brazen escape, but no one was quick to provide details.

As soon as the jailbreak was known, area newspapers covered the story of the fugitive with a feverish tone, describing Smith as an expert slack-wire walker who had walked out of jail... from two stories above. No one could have predicted the dark and desperate turn of events that would leave four people dead after a week-long manhunt through the Willamette Valley. One writer at *The Oregonian* likened the story of Smith to the stuff of dime-store novels. And maybe like pulp

fiction, the story brought welcome distraction from the other news of the day: the San Francisco earthquake. While headlines detailed destruction, devastation, and the search for missing persons, below the fold came a classic Old West tale of cops-and-robbers.

From downtown Portland, Smith traveled south to Oregon City—by what method it is not known. He moved undetected until the early morning hours of April 24th. Local fisherman Frank Trombath was heading to the wharf when he spied Smith around 3 am, throwing a rock through the window of the jewelry store. He watched as Smith stuffed his pockets with watches and rings before he ran down Main Street, veering off into an alleyway, disappearing into the darkness.

Trombath soon crossed paths with Oregon City policeman George Hanlon and, describing the scene he had witnessed, the two men doubled back. Hanlon found Smith just where the fisherman had said. Smith was initially compliant, but as Hanlon attempted to place the cuffs on him, Smith whirled around, the sudden motion causing his hat to fall from his head. He produced a revolver, and holding it low, fired off two shots. One bullet went through Hanlon while the other lodged in his abdomen. Trombath turned and ran, three bullets narrowly missing him. Smith fled the scene. He left so quickly he didn't bother to grab the black bowler that was laid on street.

Hanlon stumbled one block back to Main Street, clutching his stomach. The sound of gunfire had brought people from their homes, who called for the

police. His fellow officers rushing toward him, Hanlon announced, “Boys, I have been shot,” before collapsing on the cobblestone. He was rushed by “special car” to the hospital in Portland, but died halfway there. Hanlon used his final moments to give Police Chief Burns a description of the assailant, and every local Sheriff was instructed to be on the lookout for a 28-year-old, dark-complexioned man, standing five-foot-nine, dressed in a salt-and-pepper coat. His name was given as Frank Smith, but his identity was far from known.

Smith was next thought to be in Canby, south of Oregon City. Word of the fugitive had not yet reached the residents to the south. A local store was robbed after the window was shattered with a rock. The thief helped himself to men’s razors, food, tobacco, and ammunition, before a quick stop at the Post Office, where he managed to get away with \$1 and a cap to replace his bowler. When Oregon City authorities heard of the mysterious man in Canby, they were confident it was Smith, and confident that he would continue heading south.

Smith laid low in daytime, likely sleeping in densely wooded areas, and traveled by night. He stuck close to the railroad tracks but didn’t dare travel by rail; the yards and freight cars were being patrolled even more closely, as the reward for his capture was now set at \$500. Police mapped his trail south, following reports of sightings, the most promising given by a farmer in Woodburn who found a man sleeping in his barn.

* * *

Four law men assembled just outside of Woodburn, hoping to catch Smith as he moved in the darkness. Captain Henderson of the Woodburn police and Sheriff Shaver of Clackamas County took the lead, walking along the railroad tracks at McKee Station, while two others patrolled nearby. Shortly after midnight, Smith appeared. He walked on the tracks, straight toward Henderson and Shaver. So well-concealed was he that he was nearly upon the two men before they recognized him as their target.

Henderson called out to Smith, “Throw up your hands!” Smith stood still, his hands at his side. At this moment, Sheriff Culver of Marion County and armed militiaman Joe Richards were walking parallel to the tracks, down an embankment, closer to the tree line. They were close enough to hear the exchange but far enough that they did not have a visual. However, when the first gunshot rang out, the pair charged up the hill, Winchesters in hand.

Smith didn’t raise his arms. Firing his .44 revolver from the hip, he struck Henderson in the groin. Henderson fell to the ground immediately. Smith turned to Shaver and began shooting. Shaver responded quickly, charging toward the fugitive, firing his weapon several times. Smith struck Shaver twice. Culver and Richards chased after the desperado, firing until Smith jumped the embankment and disappeared into the forest. They didn’t follow. They rushed the fallen officers to the closest hospital in Salem, where Henderson died within hours, mid-operation. Shaver calmed his worried wife and adult children, assuring them he was feeling better, while doctors told the family what the patient did not know: it was only a matter of time.

Sheriff Shaver died some 48 hours after being shot. When word reached Oregon City at 1 am on April 30th, police rang the fire bell repeatedly, in spite of the early morning hour. Within minutes, a crowd had amassed on Main Street to learn the news. A train, it was announced, would be leaving in just a few hours for any man who wanted to join the hunt for Smith. Since the death of Henderson, both the reward and number of armed volunteers had grown. After Shaver died, the search party grew to over 200 in size.

In the crowd was C.G. Miller, the owner of Oregon City's only gun shop. After the impromptu meeting, he walked the 40 men pledging to join with the volunteers down Main Street to his storefront. He offered every rifle and revolver in his inventory as well as 1,000 rounds of ammunition to share among the volunteers already assembled in Woodburn. There, in the morning, they were joined by Harry Draper, just arrived from Spokane, Washington.

Draper had received a telegram from Sheriff Word of Multnomah County days before, inviting him to take part in the manhunt for Frank Smith. Draper was instructed to bring his trained bloodhounds. Word promised to pay for Draper's travel, from his own pocket if necessary—whatever it took to bring Draper and his dogs south. Draper stepped off the train in Woodburn on the morning of April 30th. Wasting no time, he readied his hounds, leading them to the spot where Smith had stood some 50 hours before. The weather was in his favor; the moisture of the spring rains helped the hounds to pick up the scent lingering in the air and without hesitation, they started for the woods.

The search party followed behind Draper, on full alert. They weren't willing to put anything past Smith. Some remained skeptical of the dogs' ability to track the criminal. Draper's two hounds, Sam and Brady, were three years old and recently out of training; this was their first foray into the field. The pack stopped at the banks of the Pudding River, where they lost the scent. Some of the volunteers grumbled that the rookie dogs had failed, but Draper had faith in his hounds. He was confident they had followed Smith's trail as far as they could. He hypothesized that the fugitive had jumped into the river and the water had masked Smith's scent.

The hunt for Frank Smith provided residents of Marion County with an uneasy feeling of *déjà vu*. The rural towns between Oregon City and Salem had been terrorized just four years before when, in June of 1902, career criminal Harry Tracy and his partner, David Merrill, shot their way out of the Oregon State Penitentiary. The pair headed north. Law enforcement trailed behind, following a string of reports of robbery, trespassing, and hostages who were held for short periods and forced to provide shelter or cook breakfast.

Two days after the jailbreak, with bloodhounds on the trail, they were traced through the woods southeast of Woodburn, to the edge of a gully. The dog's handler scanned the opposite side, looking for signs of the path forged by the two fugitives, when he noted a stack of rocks. Thinking it a makeshift barricade, he sensed he and the 250 militiamen were walking into a trap. The order was given to retreat, though some persisted and exchanged fire with Tracy

and Merrill for most of the night. When dawn came, and the pair didn't return fire, the search party pressed on, finding the fugitives had shaken them in the early morning hours. There, on the Little Pudding River—a tributary of its larger cousin—the trail turned cold.

Sightings of the two men continued to pour in, but law enforcement could not pick up on their trail. Days after the standoff, Tracy and Merrill crossed the Columbia and continued their deadly march north, where in the months that followed, Tracy killed five people, including his partner Merrill. He evaded police until early August, when he was surrounded in eastern Washington, and killed himself to avoid apprehension. It was far from the triumphant end sought by lawmen, or by the captivated public who flocked to newspaper offices to read bulletins of latest breaks in the case not yet gone to press. With these events in recent memory, and the fugitive seeking refuge in the same forests Tracy and Merrill had, the pressure was on for the volunteers vowing Smith's capture, dead or alive.

Just as they had with Tracy and Merrill, sightings of Smith came from every corner of the Willamette Valley. A farmer tilling his land near Woodburn was mistaken for Smith, as was a woodcutter, a pencil salesman, a robbery victim, a deaf-mute beggar, and a man hiding out in a boxcar, who was shot three times by a militiaman and survived. He was first erroneously reported to be connected with a farming family in Linn County. Another resident of Linn County, after reading of Smith in the newspaper, claimed the man was his good-

for-nothing son-in-law, who had run out on his daughter and threatened to kill him. It wasn't him.

Smith seemed unconnected and unknown to anyone in the area. He was like a shadow. It was presumed almost from the start that the name Frank Smith was an alias, but as it wasn't customary for people to carry personal identification, police had no choice but to book him under this name. Rumors circulated that he was a soldier who had gone AWOL from Atlanta, Georgia while another report had him stationed at the Vancouver barracks. Detectives crossed the Columbia to investigate but, with the battalion in San Francisco to assist following the earthquake, there wasn't anyone present who could confirm Smith's status as a soldier. What could be conjectured was that Smith wasn't just running from a pair of robbery charges—whatever was in his past was feared to be far more sinister.

Carried north on the Pudding River, Smith now walked south, covering the same ground as before. If Smith had a destination in mind, his quick getaway set him back. He had been on the run for over a week. It had likely been days since he had eaten. The food he had stolen from the Canby general store had long since run out. As law enforcement had predicted, it was hunger that drew Smith from the shadows.

Early on the morning of May 1st, Mrs. Batten arrived at her Canby bakery. She had just latched the door behind her when there was a knock so loud it startled her. She opened the door and a man pushed his way into the shop. He

held out his palm, holding three pennies and asked what he could buy with this sum. Mrs. Batten didn't recognize the man from the sketches that appeared on the front page of local papers, with a set jaw and furrowed brows. Still, she was made uneasy by his disheveled appearance and forceful attitude. She offered the man three small cakes. When he demanded more, she complied, giving him cookies until he was satisfied and left.

Willie Stengler caught sight of the stranger as he walked from the bakery. The 15-year-old noticed the man's cap, which looked an awful lot like his own cap. As the man turned away from Stengler, he saw the tell-tale tear in the blue fabric of his cap—the cap that had been plucked from his head days before when Smith had robbed the Canby Post Office. Finding Mrs. Batten shaken but unharmed, the pair set out to alert the authorities the fugitive was back in town.

The volunteers moved fast, acting on a tip from a railroad worker who spotted a man darting into the wooded area that stretched between the tracks and the Willamette River, just a half-mile south of New Era, the rural community between Canby and Oregon City. One of the first men to arrive at the tracks was an Oregon City judge. As he surveyed the scene, he snapped to attention when he saw a figure come to the tree line. Was Smith going to give himself up? But just as soon as the figure appeared, it darted back into the woods. Some of the volunteers started to charge into the thickly forested area but the command was given for all men to retreat, fearing an ambush by Smith, and more loss of life. The men had to act carefully. They formulated a plan. They would flush out the

fugitive with a dozen sticks of dynamite given by the onlooking Southern Pacific crew. The explosives were tossed into the woods at random, three sticks of dynamite detonating simultaneously with a loud blast just 12 to 15 feet from where Smith had been seen.

When the smoke cleared, Smith was gone. He slipped out of the small wood unnoticed, charging up a nearby hill, to another wood, where the thirty-foot alders and thick underbrush of blackberry vines and hazel would provide excellent cover for the fugitive. It did, until Draper arrived. He held Smith's discarded bowler hat for his hounds. Picking up the scent, the dogs pulled their master toward the hill. The volunteers were instructed to stay out of the woods, to watch for sight of Smith should he attempt to flee. They fanned out, covering all exit points, the wagon road, and the railroad tracks, while just four men descended on the woods. Draper led the charge up the hill, with his hounds baying loudly, tugging at the leash as they pursued Smith. They came to a sudden stop at a fallen log. Thinking it too high for the dog to maneuver, he started to assist the dog. As he placed a dog's front paws onto the log to lift it over, the dog resisted, alerting its master. Draper drew his gun and peered over the log. He was face-to-face with Smith, laid on the forest floor, half-hidden by the felled tree. With his gun aimed on the man, Draper confirmed he was Smith. He ordered the fugitive to put his hands up. As he spoke, Smith's hand moved toward his jacket pocket and Draper leapt over the log, still holding his gun on Smith. He crouched beside him, held the barrel of his revolver against Smith's skull and shot. Draper

relayed the showdown to the *Oregonian*: “It all happened in an instant... [It] all took place so rapidly that he was shot almost as soon as I saw him.”

Sheriff Culver and the few others followed the sound of the gunfire. Seeing Draper standing over Smith’s slumped body, they began to cheer. Soon, the hundred-man posse was cheering, too, as they ran for the forest. So many of the men wanted to catch sight of the fugitive that had terrorized the Willamette Valley, and here he was, lying in the soil, blood pouring from his left temple. They searched his pockets for clues as to the dead man’s true identity. Only Smith wasn’t dead yet. Draper’s bullet had caused significant bleeding but hadn’t killed him. Smith lay breathing heavily and groaning, but unconscious. One man commented that Smith ought to be put out of his misery, but a Sheriff ordered that no further shots be fired.

Instead, the men carried Smith’s limp, but still-live, body out of the woods and down the hill, to the train tracks. They placed him on a handcar, propping his body in an awkward upright position and began to make their way north to New Era. Hearing the whooping of the men jogging along the railroad tracks, accompanying the small party and their bounty, residents came out of their homes, out of the fields. A crowd formed, lining the road overlooking the tracks, spectators in a slow, unhappy parade. And here, an hour after he was shot, Smith finally died.

* * *

Funeral services for Sheriff Shaver were held on the morning of May 2nd in the courthouse, the only venue large enough to accommodate the crowd. Downtown Oregon City was flooded with mourners, as people from neighboring towns came to pay their respects, making it one of the most well-attended funerals in the county. Every available seat was claimed, with hundreds spilling out into the yard. The casket was eclipsed by the wreaths and bouquets. When the service concluded, his casket was taken to a cemetery downriver by way of steamboat—one in the fleet of the Shaver Transportation Company, founded by his late father and run by his two younger brothers.

Just one block from the courthouse, Shaver's killer was laid on a wooden slab in the morgue. Despite Shaver's insistence that he had struck Smith in the earlier shootout, the criminal's body didn't have a scratch on it, as visitors were surprised to discover. And there were a great many visitors, with over 200 coming up from Woodburn alone. All day long people filed into the morgue. Medical Examiner Holman restricted the number of viewings to one-per-person in an attempt to slow the steady stream coming to catch a glimpse of the desperado. The number of women and children among the crowd to see the body troubled Holman so much that he stopped all drop-in viewings of the corpse.

The body went unclaimed and was buried in Oregon City's potter's field, only to be exhumed just two weeks later when, Elias Smith arrived from Shenandoah, Iowa, worried the fugitive had been his son, Franklin. Though his son wasn't violent, he was last known to be in the Pacific Northwest and Mr. Smith hadn't heard from him in several weeks. "My boy never got into trouble,

but he was usually called Frank Smith, and the first description I read did remind me of him.” It wasn’t Franklin Smith, and the body was returned to its unmarked plot where, this time, it stayed.

Tips and theories as to the man’s identity trickled in over the next few months. In late July, 1906, police in Oregon City received a letter from C.E. Crider, written on the behalf of a Mrs. Frank Smith of Colorado. Mrs. Smith’s husband had left many months before, and he was last known to be in Oregon, the letter explained. She was convinced the desperado had been her husband. Mr. Crider enclosed a stamp-sized picture of the man in hopes that he could be identified by the police who had tracked the fugitive. It was not Smith. He was thought to be an ex-convict from the Washington State Penitentiary, a Pendleton cowboy, or Arthur Perryman, a hotelier in Drain, Oregon, depending on the source.

The day after his death, *The Oregonian* claimed there was one man who knew Frank Smith’s true identity—his partner, Ed McGuire. He was arrested the day after Smith’s jailbreak, as he pawned stolen goods. McGuire vehemently denied knowing Smith, but police were convinced there was a connection. He was questioned repeatedly over the weeklong search for Smith. Police were desperate to learn where he might be going, to head him off at the pass. But McGuire didn’t say a thing. He continued to say he’d never met the man, but he asked for daily updates on the manhunt. Jailhouse guards observed McGuire holding his head in his hands following the news of Smith’s death. If McGuire knew Smith, knew who he really was, he never said a word.

Harry Draper was celebrated for bringing an end to the week-long manhunt. While Smith's end proved more exciting than Harry Tracy's suicide, there seemed to be a quiet disappointment in the final showdown. In days following Smith's capture came an undercurrent of skepticism. Why didn't Frank Smith run when he heard the pack of dogs coming closer? Why didn't the desperado with a fully loaded revolver in his pocket fire on the men as they stormed into the woods? How could the man who had eluded law enforcement for over a week be taken down so easily in the end? Canby resident E.W. Hutchinson gave a startling answer to this question two weeks after Smith's death. Hutchinson, one of the volunteers in New Era, claimed to have witnessed Smith's final moments—only it wasn't the showdown that Draper described. According to Hutchinson, Smith gave no fight because he was unconscious, a result of the dynamite blasts, he speculated. None of the sheriffs on the scene witnessed the shooting, as they split up to surround Smith, but they didn't question Draper's version of events. Draper denied shooting a defenseless Smith, calling the story a lie told in a desperate bid for his share of the reward.

Draper was awarded half of the \$1500 reward, pledging half of his sum to the widows of the policemen killed in pursuit of Smith. The remaining \$750 reward was distributed among 35 others, including Mrs. Batten from the bakery. Some in the search party felt cheated by their take while others, like David Arthur, didn't want money but their fair share of the credit, as he wrote in a letter to the *Oregon City Enterprise*. Sheriff Culver sat on the committee that decided

how the funds should be disbursed. He contributed \$250 of his own money to the reward after Shaver was killed, but declined his own \$50 portion. “I have never parted with money so willingly,” he said of the reward. He was, however, very eager for the next item on the committee’s agenda—to procure bloodhounds for state of Oregon. In August, 1907, three dogs arrived at the Oregon State Penitentiary to stay. They had been trained by, and purchased from, Draper.

Draper became something of a celebrity. He declined numerous invitations from Portland-area theaters for public appearances. He made just one in September, 1906. Crowds at Spokane’s Interstate Fair saw Draper in action in an elaborately staged scene with eerie echoes of the hunt for Smith. The performance began when two men argued loudly over a horse race, drawing the attention of the crowd packed into the grandstand. There were gasps when one man pulled a gun and “shot” the other. He fled from the scene, his hat falling to the ground. Minutes later, while the “dead” man was loaded into an ambulance, Draper’s dogs picked up the scent from the gunmen’s hat and trailed him through the midway crowd, where, when face-to-face with the “murderer,” Draper “killed” him.

The theatrical show delighted the crowd, but drew criticism from local press, worried the realistic hunt would frighten the women and children in attendance, and that such displays made murder a form of entertainment. More than that, one *Spokane Press* op-ed argued, Draper’s playacting promoted vigilantism, celebrating the bygone days of the Wild West, writing: “The trade of a professional man trailer and killer cannot be popularly indorsed nor approved

although it may be quietly tolerated so long as the officers can make use of him.” Make use of him they did. Draper was well sought after in the wake of Smith’s capture. He and his hounds traveled to every corner of the Pacific Northwest to aid in the capture of train robbers, bombers, escaped convicts, and missing persons. In spite of all his successful captures, Draper remained most known as the man who brought down Frank Smith, his name forever linked to the fugitive’s.

There is something inherently unsatisfying in the story of Frank Smith—the unsolved mystery of his identity and the unclear motivation urging his desperate dash up and down the Willamette Valley. These lingering questions subvert expectations for a resolution—the reveal of the Who in the Whodunit. Spectators wanted more than a name. They wanted his history, his roots—something that could give reason for his actions. They wanted a definite ending to the narrative that riveted the region as it unfolded. As the search for Smith stretched on, his name moved above the fold, with bold newspaper headlines that dominated over the fires consuming San Francisco, the rising body count, and reports of desperate pleas for updates on loved ones found baked into loaves of bread for the volunteers soldiers. The clear-cut tale of good and evil may have provided some escapism. It had all the elements of a dime novel: upstanding lawmen like Culver and Draper to root for and, of course, a murderous villain in Smith. But what started as a detective story ended as a mystery.

The Greatest Auto Dealer Commercial of All Time

The final product clocked in at a minute-and-a-half: a smorgasbord of fireballs, doves, cheerleaders, a gospel choir, a car-themed ballet, gymnastics tumbling routine, skateboarders, ninjas, and a perplexing video montage of rocket launches, the leaning tower of Pisa, a political rally, a Viking, and kittens set against Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. This frenzied, epic commercial, billed as "The Greatest Auto Dealer Commercial of All Time," was unveiled in fall 2002, during the season debut of *Friends*. After seven months, and over 20 commercials leading up to this spot, this was certainly must-see TV. There was only one auto dealer daring enough to take such a risk, the man who built an empire on the back of his quirky ads: Scott Thomason. But what was planned as Thomason's biggest triumph was instead his swan song, signaling the swift end to Portland's most innovative advertising powerhouse.

Thomason was an unlikely millionaire mogul, and even less likely television star. He was described by one former employee as "a nerdy, Elvis Costello-type." With his boyish features and large, plastic-framed eyeglasses, he could easily be mistaken for the dealership's accountant rather than its CEO. After graduating from the University of Oregon with a Bachelor's in Business, Thomason returned to the Portland-area in 1976. Like most recent grads, he wasn't quite sure what he wanted to do. He worked at his father Dee Thomason's Ford dealership in Lake Oswego while he plotted his next move. He had worked

on and off at the dealership since he was 12, washing cars on the lot for extra pocket money. Without a particular interest in cars, the younger Thomason never intended to work in the industry—but he stayed, finding he had a talent for it.

Dee Thomason was the smallest of local Ford dealerships; its location in suburban Lake Oswego lacked visibility. Still, in the economic downturn in 1981-82, when nearly half of area dealerships folded, Thomason Ford flourished through its used car sales. To keep the momentum going, Thomason convinced his father it was time to make a bold move—all the way to Auto Row, the miles-long stretch of SE McLoughlin Boulevard lined with gleaming, jewel-tone cars on both sides of the four-lane thoroughfare. The timing worked in their favor, as Ford introduced a new Thunderbird in 1983 that sent sales skyrocketing. With the business secure, Dee Thomason sold the dealership to his son.

From the start, advertising preoccupied the younger Thomason. The earliest TV advertisements show him walking stiffly across the showroom floor, delivering every line of dialogue with an awkward nod of his head, including what would become his famous tagline: “If you don’t come see me today, I can’t save you any money.” Thomason was confident he could make the dealership stand out among its competitors, and he thought advertising was the key. He studied dealerships across the country for cues. Those that did the best, he concluded, were instantly recognizable to their customers. Thomason needed to be more than just a name. Consumers needed a face to connect to the company—his face. Soon, lemon-yellow banners lined the miles of McLoughlin Boulevard. Poised

atop of the sunny background was Thomason's visage, with his sly smirk and round, owlish glasses. Billboards and busses bore this image with little ad copy. The face said it all. He explained his strategy to *The Oregonian* in 1994: "The customer wants to know who owns the store, who they're buying from." The goal, as with any advertising, was for consumers to think of Thomason as soon as they thought of buying a car. And it worked. Thomason Auto Group continually outsold its closest competitors by two-to-one.

Finally, Thomason had found his stride with the help of advertising team Michele O'Hara, Craig Opfer, and Diane Barasch of agency JohnsonSheen. He trusted this trio implicitly. When Thomason got word that Barasch had accepted a job offer, he grew anxious. He thought, perhaps superstitiously, that his advertising would suffer with personnel changes. He severed ties with the agency, pulling TAG's billings of \$9 million—nearly one-third of JohnsonSheen's business. CEO Pat Johnson was frustrated, and even more so when she learned that Thomason poached the agency's most experienced staff, saying the move was purely emotional and retroactively justified as a business decision. Thomason was unapologetic, telling the *Oregonian* in 1996: "My control issue is keeping together the team that has made the ad campaign so successful. These three people are the ones who're doing my business."

They kept Thomason's business under the moniker, Nerve—a startup bankrolled by Thomason himself. He remained a silent partner with Opfer at the helm as Creative Director, and with O'Hara and Barasch—who re-joined the team—handling accounts and media. Five additional employees were brought on

to service their biggest client, Thomason Auto Group. Geoff Rogers was among the first writers hired at Nerve. Between 1995 and 2002, he wrote somewhere between 50 to 75 spots for TAG. Thomason's approach to media mirrored his approach to car sales: volume. "He carpet-bombed local media," Rogers says. TAG's advertisements were ubiquitous—in print, on the radio, and they were the first dealership to have a strong presence on the web, creating original content for TAG's website. However, Thomason's favorite medium was television.

Every six months or so, TAG would shoot four new spots—each focused on one of TAG's four selling points: selection, financing, price, and volume. The consistent messaging meant the ads were interchangeable. They could air in any order or be revived months, even years, later. O'Hara recalls much of the TAG spots as flying in the face of car advertising conventions. With the ads centered around Thomason and his understated, straight-man style, they played against the over-the-top delivery rampant in car commercials. Almost unthinkably, cars are virtually absent from these commercials. On the rare occasion one did appear, it was used as a prop, like in one spot with a monster truck driving over a compact car filled with New England clam chowder. This kind of unorthodox advertising was not always successful. Just a few years before Subaru fired Wieden+Kennedy for their slant take on a conventional sports car ad, with the "What to Drive" campaign. But on this smaller stage, Nerve's work garnered attention for TAG, and for the newly formed ad agency.

* * *

Nerve steadily built their clientele, establishing accounts with the Oregon Ballet and the Portland Trailblazers. Within just two years, Opfer and O'Hara bought the agency from Thomason—Barasch, this time, left for good. They established their headquarters in an industrialized section of NW Portland, tucked between the 405 freeway and the rail yards. The air was pungent with the smell of spent hops from the nearby Weinhart brewery. The sidewalks were dotted with trash and hypodermic needles. Writer Rogers shakes his head, recalling a time when, leaving the office, he crossed paths with a prostitute working in the building's vestibule. "And these were *daytime* prostitutes," he says, and laughs. Thomason didn't play a role in operations, but he could often be found in the offices of Nerve, stopping in for a drink or to chew the fat with Opfer. "He treated that place like his clubhouse," Rogers says. Here, they saw a different side to Thomason, one masked by his goofy charm and signature monogrammed gold cuff links. Rogers sums up Thomason with: "He's the guy who was in band in high school and then became a rock star."

This isn't much of an exaggeration as Thomason was something of a celebrity. His face was everywhere. Under Thomason's tenure, TAG tripled in size, growing into a fleet of 21 car lots. Ten years after taking over the family business, TAG reported sales of more than \$1 million per day. By 1998, TAG's revenue had exceeded \$550 million, garnering industry attention from across the country. With this success, Thomason was counted among the wealthiest people in Portland. He certainly could have afforded to take a day off, but didn't. He showed up the office every day. A joke among employees was that Thomason was

a Type AAA personality. “There are two kinds of hungry,” Rogers says. “There are those who grew up with nothing and those who had money but are always trying to prove themselves—that was Scott. He was always trying to prove himself.”

The visibility that Thomason wanted veered into overexposure. “There was a constant danger of people getting sick of the face,” Rogers says. In the wake of scandals rising out of a very public divorce and consumer complaints, Thomason decided it was time for re-branding, which included a new logo. “I thought it was a mistake to move away from the face logo,” Rogers says. “I thought it made him more approachable.” The new logo—a teal background with three yellow curving lines to evoke mountainous roads—was unveiled in a TV spot. In something of a reversal, Thomason stated in a 2001 interview: “Thomason Auto Group is not just about me, personally, so we need to separate me, personally, from the logo.” Thomason’s face wasn’t just absent from TAG’s logo. For the first time in nearly 20 years, Thomason didn’t appear in the TV ads.

Creatively, Nerve didn’t miss a beat without the spokesman, creating some of the most memorable spots in the TAG canon—among them was one seemingly advertising bespoke toothpicks. Walking through a dense, mossy forest, a man gestures to the towering Firs and says wistfully, “The best of them will become Blevin’s toothpicks.” Hand-lathed, sanded, and coated with vegetable oil, the man—presumably, Mr. Blevin—proudly holds the finished product while the voice-over chimes in with a gibe about name brands before touting selection of name brands available through TAG. Thomason appeared in one spot, though in a muted form. A man in a tattered and torn suit bursts into a rural bait shop and

makes a bee-line for the only food in the store. Seeing the price tag, he cries out: “\$600 for a candy bar? Doesn’t anyone around here deal in volume?” The shopkeep looks up from whittling wood, to a framed photo of Thomason hanging on the wall, saying, “There is this one fell’er.” Through these ads, Nerve teased apart what they had built, separating the man from his business empire. But after a year-long hiatus, Thomason wanted back in.

The team went to work in 2002 on new material to pitch. “Scott wanted to be back in the commercials and he wanted it to be big. So, I went big,” writes Ian Cohen in an email. “I thought if he wants to be in the spots, let’s make it all about him.” Head writer Cohen’s inspiration came, in part, from TAG’s previous ads. “I think it was the best auto dealer work I had ever seen,” he says. “This entire campaign was really an homage to the fact that I thought he already did the greatest auto dealer spots of all time.” Cohen’s other influences came by way of Christopher Guest’s largely-improvised, mockumentary-style films. Nerve frequently looked to media for inspiration, drawing on such sources as *Perry Mason*, *The Twilight Zone*, and *Scooby-Doo*—to which Rogers quips, “I can’t believe Hanna-Barbera didn’t sue us!” To translate the convoluted campaign pitch, Cohen and interim Creative Director, Austin Howe, showed clips from Guest’s work, particularly *Waiting for Guffman*, with its window into community theater. They wanted to do something similar, they explained, giving a behind-the-scenes view into the filming of “The Greatest Auto Dealer Commercial.” Each spot would be a stand-alone narrative showing the dance rehearsals, the conflicts,

and the bonding moments between the director and his star. Put together, the series of tongue-in-cheek commercials would have a similar cinematic scope, culminating in an over-the-top, poor quality, spastic, and intentionally bad commercial. The self-referential campaign was like turning the camera on themselves. “The idea was to make fun of ourselves in the advertising business,” O’Hara says. “You have the producer, the finicky director storming off set, then everything goes wrong—we made fun of every single part of shooting commercials.”

As Accounts Manager at Nerve, part of O’Hara’s job was to sell the client on the idea pitched by the creative team. With Thomason, O’Hara had it easy. He wasn’t afraid to take risks, spend money, or make a fool of himself, dressing up in previous spots as a Carnaby Street mod and a white-haired Shaolin master. Thomason had faith in his long-time collaborators, and needed little in the way of assurance or convincing. He rarely said no. “I’ve never had a client that easy to sell to since,” jokes Mark Radcliffe, second writer on “The Greatest Auto Dealer” campaign. For Thomason, ads weren’t about cost or return on investment. “He liked the creative side of advertising,” Rogers says. Given this, the agency had free rein and it showed in the work—nowhere was this more apparent than in “The Greatest Auto Dealer Commercial of All Time.”

Casting for the role of the temperamental TV commercial director was crucial. For the double act to work, they needed an actor whose over-the-top, exaggerated performance would play well against Thomason’s formal, straight-

laced style. The first choice was fairly obvious. They approached Guest to co-star and direct the ads, but a scheduling conflict prevented him from signing on. They ran through a roster that included Fred Willard and Andy Dick—who took himself out of the running with his re-writes of the character and script. Cohen suggested the lesser-known Kevin McDonald of the Canadian sketch comedy series *Kids in the Hall*. McDonald, he thought, could play the narcissistic and affable director. McDonald was hesitant, it being a local car campaign. Cohen attempted to win him over by sending a reel of previous TAG advertisements to establish their work as leaps and bounds from Cal Worthington’s jingles or grainy, low-budget spots. This was something special, something that no one would forget, they promised him.

Signing on, McDonald played Santo—“a name synonymous with commercial-directing genius.” The stakes are high for Santo, as this is first directing gig since a nervous breakdown interrupted his promising career. After a respite and recovery, including the lesser known sport of “running with the giraffes,” Santo is poised for a comeback. This is the introduction from an early spot, “Inside Santo,” a black-and-white spot with a dramatic voice-over in the style of *E! True Hollywood Story* or VH1’s *Behind the Music*. In the next spot, an overly-confident Santo stands before Thomason and his associates and declares: “I am Santo. I will create for you the greatest auto dealer commercial of all time.” And so it begins. Over the next 20 spots, the campaign slowly unravels with Santo’s earnest but misguided vision to continually pack the already bloated spot with llamas, daredevils, and celebrities.

One spot drew national attention with its guest star. Producer Lizzie Schwartz and Santo's biggest admirer, played by Deborah Theaker—a regular player in Guest's mockumentary films—is seeking out star power for Santo. She approaches Olympic ice skater Tonya Harding as she leaves her former practice space, the Clackamas Town Center mall. Harding demurely declines the invitation to appear in the ad, as she climbs into an awaiting truck. The producer continues to plead. Harding smiles sweetly and says: "I don't do cheesy car commercials. It would ruin my image." One writer recalls this day on the set fondly, recalling Harding was "actually really sweet." When filming concluded on her spot, she gifted him with a pair of her ice skates. Another writer remembers the shoot differently, as the day when money and several personal items went missing from the green room. He's careful to say he can't prove anything, but he recalls only one person left alone in the green room that day, and to say her name would ruin her image.

The shoot was a hectic three days, with all 25 spots filmed in early winter—the dreary, grey skies visible in every exterior shot. The break-neck pacing and the complicated shooting schedule organized around working with union and non-union crew, didn't allow for Guest's characteristic improvised style. However, it came through in glimmers. In one spot Santo sits across from a polished, well-coiffed Thomason and demands that he repeat the phrase: "I have used cars." As Thomason says the phrase, Santo leans over and begins kneading Thomason's face and mussing his hair while Thomason struggles to keep a

straight face. “I will say it was totally ridiculous what we tried to do with the budget we had and the talent we wanted and the caliber of what we wanted to do, but pulling it off was still one of the most fun projects,” Cohen says while adding, “We should really have done about six [spots].”

But an abbreviated campaign might not have attracted the attention Howe wanted. Nerve had never won any local advertising awards for their work on the TAG account, though this work had been recognized nationally. This was a sore spot for some in the agency. There was a quiet fear that they had been blackballed due to unsubstantiated rumors about Thomason’s behavior. Howe was out to change this with a campaign so big and so visible it would command attention from the Portland Advertising Federation. “Austin Howe is very, very good at selling things. He has this big, fill-the-room personality,” Rogers says. Over the years of working with Howe in agencies across town, Rogers had seen him hypnotize a room. In hindsight, some think Howe was more interested in the attention the campaign would bring to him—both professionally and personally—than in the interests of the client, or even the agency. “He wasn’t a partner nor was he a full-time employee, so there was little to no motivation to protect the account,” one writer recalls. Howe declined to comment, only writing: “That was the single most ridiculous and wonderful campaign I’ve ever been a part of.” He continues to freelance, with design work in his portfolio for the very award he sought for “The Greatest Auto Dealer Commercial”—its tagline, *One Rosey and you feel like a rock star*. Neither Nerve nor Howe won a Rosey, and once again, it may have been due to Thomason and some very ill-timed bad press.

On October 3rd, 2002, days after the premiere of “The Greatest Auto Commercial,” Thomason was heading home to his mansion in the west hills, driving through downtown Portland in his gold Toyota Avalon. Thomason didn’t see the car ahead pause at a crosswalk, and plowed into the back of the Jeep Wrangler. He surveyed the damage to his car, the hood buckled with center dent from the bike rack mounted on the Jeep. He didn’t check on the driver, didn’t say a thing, before climbing into his vehicle, swerving around the Jeep, and speeding away. When police arrived on the scene, they immediately discovered part of a broken license plate holder bearing Thomason’s face—still the most famous in town. Five witnesses were confident in their identification of the driver. The next day, police visited the office of Thomason’s lawyer, citation in hand for a felony hit-and-run.

By his October 28th court appearance, the charges were reduced to a misdemeanor of failing to perform the duties of a driver, in leaving the scene. One former employee shakes his head and says he wasn’t surprised that Thomason did so. “He needed to find someplace to sober up,” he says, adding: “He liked to tie one on at the end of the day.” While Thomason was only cited for leaving the scene of an accident, he was ordered to undergo evaluation for alcohol-use and possible treatment in addition to 100 hours of community service and 18 months’ probation. Thomason reemerged a little more than a month later, announcing he was stepping down as CEO. After 20 years, the man

dubbed Portland's "Car King" abdicated his throne. Thomason insisted this was a planned departure, and entirely unrelated to his legal woes. He cited the recent ad campaign as evidence of premeditation, saying he would not have something so ostentatious as "The Great Auto Dealer Commercial" if he intended to continue. Those working on the campaign were not quite convinced. Recalling Thomason's sudden exit, one longtime collaborator wrote in an email: "Who would have thought that this would be the last campaign for Thomason?" Some colleagues would answer this question with "Asbury Automotive Group."

In 1998, Thomason had quietly sold 51% share in his fleet of dealerships to the Pennsylvania-based Asbury Automotive Group, the third largest auto retailer nationally. In March 2002, Thomason joined with Asbury executives to ring the opening bell at the New York Stock Exchange, in honor of Asbury's IPO. Once the stock went public, so did the details of the sale. The SEC filings showed that Asbury paid \$68 million to acquire TAG. Curiously, it also revealed that Thomason paid back to Asbury \$6.8 million in cash and stock to cover the cost of what Thomason vaguely referred to as "certain business practices" and "certain employment practices," in a statement to *Willamette Week*. In 2000, The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission found that Thomason "knew of and tolerated a racially hostile work environment," following employee complaints. He settled with the 11 plaintiffs for a sum of \$2.5 million, telling the *Oregonian*, it "made the most sense" to settle, rather than "go all the way to litigation." As for the "certain business practices," Thomason was alluding to hundreds of

customers being overcharged when buying from one of his 16 used car lots. TAG self-reported the error, blaming a computer glitch, and began issuing refunds that totaled 1.5 million dollars.

This was not great news; nor were the dwindling sales. While 2001 was a banner year for new car sales nationally, TAG reported a decline in sales of nearly 19%. This was blamed on a change to TAG's financing options. In dozens of TAG's commercials, Thomason promises: "We offer financing to anyone the law allows." TAG underwrote many of these loans, meaning if a customer defaulted on payments, TAG—Thomason himself—would be on the hook. This was not a common practice in the industry, with many seeing this as a risky move. Thomason was unconcerned. The high interest rates alone were enough to ensure commitment from his consumers. Asbury was a more conventional organization than Thomason's outfit. When they took a controlling share in TAG, they immediately discontinued this line of credit and, in turn, sales decreased sharply. Additionally, Asbury wanted Thomason to rein in spending, particularly with regard to advertising. Where TAG spent \$6 to \$8 million annually, the new owners wanted to see the figure cut 40%.

The numbers vary. By some accounts, the total on "The Greatest Auto Dealer" swelled to \$1 million, while others say it was half that. Either way, Asbury was left with sticker shock. Several people on the campaign reported that Asbury was frustrated by the end result—25 commercials teasing a bloated, 90-second spot that defied editing. "It's prohibitively expensive to ever run it again," Rogers explains. "Part of what was funny about [the commercial] was that it was

grandiose and bloated.” Asbury may not have been laughing. They didn’t see an innovative ad campaign like no other—before or since—they saw two dozen commercials which couldn’t be re-aired. “The Greatest Auto Dealer” just may have been the final straw, as one writer suggested: “If you’re a big holding company on the East Coast and you’re looking at expense sheets from all the businesses you own... It makes sense.” Asbury accepted Thomason’s resignation, with their official statement reporting it had been Thomason’s decision alone. For his part, Cohen writes: “I really enjoyed working with Scott. Hopefully [the campaign] didn’t have anything to do with his departure.”

It isn’t likely there will ever be a definitive answer to why Thomason left a full year before his contract with Asbury ended. Regardless, with his sudden departure, “The Greatest Auto Dealer” campaign wasn’t the triumph the teasers suggested. Nor was it written to be. There was one last spot that followed the 90-second epic, forgotten even by those who wrote the campaign. It ends as it began, in boardroom with Thomason and his real-life Yes Men. They are screening Santo’s dramatic and overly long commercial. As it ends, the camera pans for reaction from Thomason. There is an awkward silence, interrupted when one of the men announces firmly, “We cannot air this!” Thomason slumps down in his chair, embarrassed. Holding his head in his hands, he wears an expression of regret, a look that silently asks the question: *What was I thinking?* The screen goes black, reading: “The Greatest Auto Dealer Commercial of All Time: Cancelled.” O’Hara describes the campaign’s U-turn in an email, with: “Then we blew it all up. Fitting for the way that Thomason went out.”

Thomason left Oregon for Northern California, buying a multi-million dollar house in Sausalito. He attempted to retire, but he grew restless after only three weeks. The auto industry had dominated his life—the late night hours at the dealership were cited as grounds for divorce by his first wife in 1994. “He was always thinking of his business,” Rogers says. Thomason bought his way into a partnership at Barber Auto Group in Fairfield, California. This was his chance to build something entirely his own—and this time, he would do so from behind the scenes. He started exactly where he had with TAG: advertising. “I don’t see anything that really stands out in the market I’m in now,” Thomason told the *Oregonian* in 2003. “I’m going to stand out. I’m going to do the same thing here that I did in Portland.” He tried to recreate what had worked so well for him, but quickly found his vision didn’t quite translate with the new ad agency. He turned to his team at Nerve for help.

While Nerve continued to work with Thomason as consultants, they lost the TAG account—their first and largest. “The Greatest Auto Dealer” was the last to bear their thumbprint. TAG’s deluge of eye-catching ads raised the stakes for competing dealerships, pushing them to spend more money—though still miles from TAG’s budget—and to get more creative. But with both Nerve and Thomason out of the picture, there was little incentive to keep pushing the envelope. TAG’s advertising took a turn. It became indiscernible from the car commercial cliché, with a frenzied voice-over shouting about low monthly prices

on Pontiacs over flashy stock footage of a Sunfire driving on country roads or over city bridges. There is no person, no face in the ad—the only touch of humanity, or approximation thereof, comes at the end with a sunny jingle proclaiming, “The best people / the best prices / Thomason treats you right!” It was the antithesis Thomason’s style, carefully crafted and honed by a tight-knit creative team. In building his brand with his name and face plastered across the Portland-area, Thomason changed the face of local auto advertising. As the brand’s ambassador, he was recognized everywhere he went. “You just never have any privacy,” he had said in 2003. In California, Thomason found a quiet life, all but disappearing from the public eye. He wasn’t able to recreate the success he had had with TAG, selling his ten dealerships, and retiring from the auto industry, in 2010.

Nerve carried on. They continued experimenting with the documentary-style for the Portland Trailblazers in a series of spots showing the players playfully interacting with local notables like former mayor Vera Katz and Gus van Sant. O’Hara is still surprised today by the talent they were able to net. “When you’re young and passionate and you’ve got a company called Nerve,” she trails off, laughing. They tried to keep their momentum going after losing their meal ticket. Reinventing themselves as a brand consulting firm, they contracted with ad agencies. Three years after they parted ways with TAG, Nerve ostensibly folded. O’Hara was the only of the 30 employees to remain. Continuing with consulting work, O’Hara rebranded the company Luminous Brand Consultancy

before packing up for Bend, where she works as the Marketing Director for a television production company.

The other players still work in the industry, where they bring traces of TAG's humor and off-beat aesthetic. Opfer left Nerve roughly around the time Thomason changed the logo he had designed. He founded his own agency, Magneto, bringing a similar style to campaigns of TAG's competitors, eager to fill the gap left by Thomason. Radcliffe is based in New York, freelancing on national anti-smoking and Leave No Trace campaigns. Cohen moved to Seattle, where he co-founded the agency curiously called Wexley School for Girls, responsible for a national and interactive campaign that returned the iconic Rainier R to the Seattle skyline. Rogers started his own one-man agency, Sunshine State, working on radio and TV spots for Oregon Lottery, bringing a touch of dark humor to scratch-it ads.

For the Nerve alumni, the TAG account was a significant professional loss. Thomason had been their greatest champion and their easiest client. "We were able to get away with trying almost anything with that guy," Radcliffe writes. Rogers agrees, saying Thomason rarely said no. Even while dealership managers and accountants balked at the pitch, Thomason listened, engaged and interested. "He was a good audience," Rogers recalls. Advertising was like high stakes gambling. Thomason didn't pore over the sales numbers, tracking the success of a spot by the number of units sold. He just rolled the dice. He liked the risk involved in advertising. He liked the art of it. He liked the attention the one-of-a-kind ads brought to TAG, and perhaps to him as well. "The Greatest Auto Dealer"

campaign couldn't have been made by another auto dealer. Thomason quitting was the end of an era, the end of a professional high that came with boundless creative freedom, deep pockets, and unexpected perks. Rogers sums up this partnership simply, with: "For a while there, we did some cool work and had a great time."

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